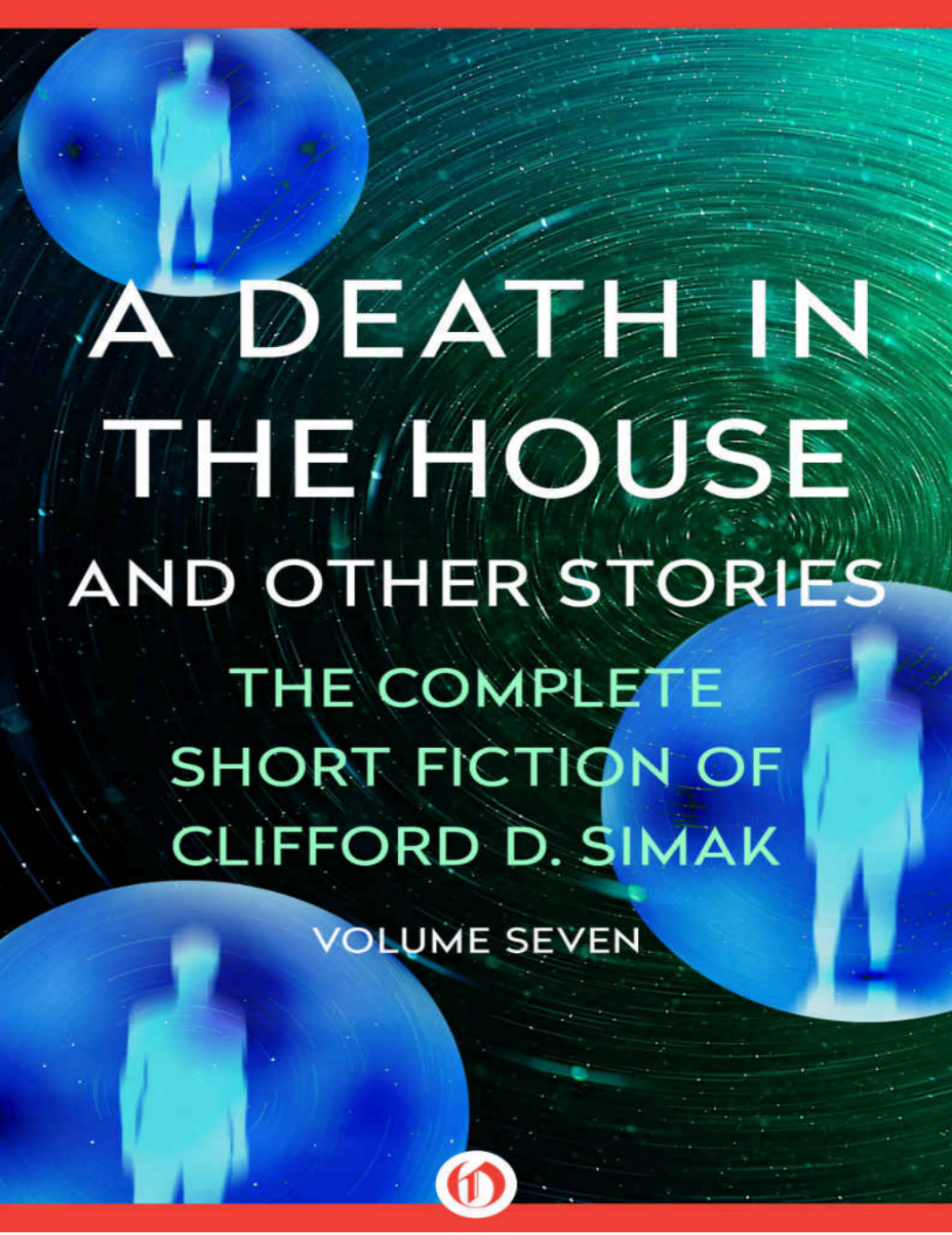
A DEATH IN THE HOUSE
AND OTHER STORIES
THE COMPLETE SHORT FICTION OF CLIFFORD D. SIMAK
VOLUME SEVEN

SHOUT
SHARE
IT

Annotation

Ten thrilling and intriguing tales of space travel, war, and alien encounters from multiple Hugo Award–winning Grand Master of Science Fiction Clifford D. Simak.

From Frank Herbert's *Dune* to Isaac Asimov's Foundation series to Philip K. Dick's stories of bizarre visions of a dystopian future, the latter half of the twentieth century produced some of the finest examples of speculative fiction ever published. Yet no science fiction author was more highly regarded than Grand Master Clifford D. Simak, winner of numerous honors, including the Hugo and Nebula Awards and a Bram Stoker Award for Lifetime Achievement.

This magnificent compendium of stories, written during science fiction's golden age, highlights Simak at his very best, combining ingenious concepts with his trademark humanism and exploring strange visitations, remarkable technologies, and humankind's destiny in the possible worlds of tomorrow. Whether it's an irascible old man's discovery of a very unusual skunk that puts him at odds with the US Air Force, a county agent's strange bond with the sentient alien flora he discovers growing in his garden, the problems a small town faces when its children mature too rapidly thanks to babysitters from another galaxy, or the gift a lonely farmer receives in exchange for aiding a dying visitor from another world, the events detailed in Simak's poignant and beautiful tales will thrill, shock, amuse, and astonish in equal measure.

One of the genre's premier literary artists, Simak explores time travel and time engines; examines the rituals and superstitions of galactic travelers who have long forgotten their ultimate purpose; and even takes fascinating detours through World War II and the wild American West in a wondrous anthology that no science fiction fan should be without.

- A Death in the House
  - ○
  - ○ INTRODUCTION
  - ○ Operation Stinky
  - ○ Green Thumb
  - ○ When It's Hangnoose Time in Hell
    - ■
    - ■ CHAPTER ONE
    - ■ CHAPTER TWO
    - ■ CHAPTER THREE
    - ■ CHAPTER FOUR

- CHAPTER FIVE
- CHAPTER SIX

- The Sitters
- Tools
- Target Generation
- War Is Personal
- Nine Lives
- A Death in the House
- The Birch Clump Cylinder
- ABOUT THE AUTHOR
- ABOUT THE EDITOR

A Death in the House
And Other Stories
The Complete Short Fiction of Clifford D. Simak, Volume Seven

Introduction by David W. Wixon

INTRODUCTION
The Misunderstood "Hiatus"

> *"We can travel forward to the day when all that exists comes to an end in the ultimate dispersion of wasted energy, when even space may be wiped out of existence and nothing but frozen time remains."*
>
> *—Clifford D. Simak in "The Creator"*

After five of his stories were published in 1931–32—the fifth being "The Asteroid of Gold" in the November 1932 issue of *Wonder Stories*—Clifford D. Simak largely vanished from the world of science fiction publishing for five years (only one of his stories would be published during that time: "The Creator" in the September 1935 issue of *Marvel Tales*, a forum more akin to a fan publication than to a professional magazine). However, when former rising star writer John W. Campbell Jr. was appointed to take over the editorship of *Astounding Science Fiction* in September of 1937, Cliff quickly returned to the field, publishing three stories in that magazine within five months.

Since that time, some historians of science fiction have argued that Cliff Simak had purposely withdrawn from the field; some even characterized "The Creator," which was so iconoclastic that it might well have been rejected by other publications, as an impolite farewell gesture to the field. Those historians suggested that Cliff had become dissatisfied with the low pay, the low quality of the science fiction being published, and the low expectations of the editors in the field. Robert Silverberg would later say, with some truth, that Cliff "drifted away from writing fiction" because the magazines paid poorly and slowly and the editors "were often capricious and limited in their taste."

While it is true that of the three science fiction magazines around at that time, *Astounding Science Fiction* had temporarily suspended publication early in 1933 and both *Wonder Stories* and *Amazing Stories* were skipping months, making their continued survival seem precarious, it is a mistake to suggest that Cliff Simak had decided to turn his back on the field, or to quit trying to write. His journals show that during the years in question, he submitted at least five science

fiction stories to magazines, one of which was initially accepted but then returned when the magazine suspended publication. (Keep in mind that all of this took place against the background of the Great Depression.)

And although Sam Moskowitz said that Cliff "tried a few things outside the sf field, but felt they had come off too poorly to submit" (*Seekers of Tomorrow*, World Publishing Co., 1966), Cliff's journals again show that during the period at issue he had not only written, but had submitted at least seven non–science fiction stories or articles—including a couple of Westerns, a couple of "outdoor life" stories, and several stories that cannot be characterized absent more to go on than their titles—to various markets.

Clearly, then, Cliff Simak had not given up on writing. And if you're thinking that a total of twelve stories and articles is not a great deal to show for the efforts of a writer with pretensions of seriousness, keep in mind, for one thing, that in 1932, Cliff was still at his very first job in the field of journalism, working on a small-town newspaper (in Iron River, Michigan) for which he both wrote a column and had risen, in a short time, to the position of editor. Surely he was kept busy; the editors of such small-town papers generally had to do just about everything that was necessary to get the paper out, including going out to sell ad space.

In addition, Cliff and his wife, Kay, moved from Iron River to Spencer, Iowa, in August of 1932, when Cliff become the editor of the *Spencer Reporter*. In July 1934, they moved on to Dickinson, North Dakota, where Cliff became editor of the *Dickinson Press*. In April 1935, it was back to Spencer, Iowa—Cliff had been hired by the paper's new owners to convert the *Reporter* from a semi-weekly to a daily. And during the following four years, the syndicate that owned the *Reporter*, using Cliff as a sort of trouble-shooter, transferred him to Excelsior Springs, Missouri; Worthington, Minnesota; and finally Brainerd, Minnesota. The odyssey would only end when Cliff got a job with the *Minneapolis Star* in 1939.

In short, although Cliff Simak had only "The Creator" published during the four-year period of 1933–37 (apparently written in 1933, it was published in 1935), you cannot say that he was not trying to write—and all while moving around the Upper Midwest to handle the challenges involved in rescuing a series of small-town newspapers from possible failures.

According to what Cliff told Moskowitz, it was not he who had given up on science fiction, rather, he felt at the time, that there was no longer a market. He wrote "The Creator," he said, and finally sent it to William L. Crawford, who hoped to start a literary sf magazine but could offer only a lifetime subscription as payment. It turned out

not to be a long lifetime. … “Had there been a market,” Cliff told Moskowitz, “the story would never have been written, for I would have slanted for that market.” But Cliff let Crawford have the story, he said, “out of sheer admiration for any man with guts enough to try a new science fiction magazine.”

And as a final weight in the scale, I would suggest that “The Creator,” rather than having been written as a kind of “I’ve had it with you people” flaming gesture, actually fits within the body of Cliff Simak’s ongoing exploration of religious thought. It was an extension of ideas that appeared in the author’s very first published story, “The World of the Red Sun.”

“The Creator,” still showing the crudities to be expected of an inexperienced author and appearing in a publication probably read only by a few hundred people, attracted notice for its defiance of the taboos that bound more commercial publications nonetheless. And when John W. Campbell Jr., was made editor of a revived *Astounding Science Fiction*, Cliff Simak believed that science fiction had a new life. And he was right.

David W. Wixon

Operation Stinky

Published originally in the April 1957 issue of Galaxy Science Fiction, this story comes from a time when drunks were funny, uneducated backwoodsmen were the salt of the earth, and people who resented the government's intrusions into their lives were heroes.

The world has changed a great deal since that time, but some verities are eternal—including the one that says that people won't always recognize when aliens come calling. Clifford Simak used this image a number of times over the course of his career, and it proved to be an effective mask for the deeper meanings in his stories.

—dww

I was sitting on the back stoop of my shack, waiting for the jet with the shotgun at my right hand and a bottle at my left, when the dogs began the ruckus.

I took a quick swig from the bottle and lumbered to my feet. I grabbed a broom and went around the house.

From the way that they were yapping, I knew the dogs had cornered one of the skunks again and those skunks were jittery enough from the jets without being pestered further.

I walked through the place where the picket fence had fallen down and peered around the corner of the shack. It was getting dusk, but I could see three dogs circling the lilac thicket and from the sound of it, another had burrowed half-way into it. I knew that if I didn't put an end to it, all hell was bound to pop.

I tried to sneak up on them, but I kept stumbling over old tin cans and empty bottles and I decided then and there, come morning, I'd get that yard cleaned up. I had studied on doing it before, but it seemed there always was some other thing to do.

With all the racket I was making, the three dogs outside the thicket scooted off, but the one that had pushed into the lilacs was having trouble backing out. I zeroed in on him and smacked him dead center with the broom. The way he got out of there—well, he was one of those loose-skinned dogs and for a second, I swear, it looked like he was going to leave without his hide.

He was yelping and howling and he came popping out like a cork out of a bottle and he ran straight between my legs. I tried to keep my balance, but I stepped on an empty can and sat down undignified. The fall knocked the breath out of me and I seemed to have some trouble

getting squared around so I could get on my feet again.

While I was getting squared around, a skunk walked out of the lilac bush and came straight toward me. I tried to shoo him off, but he wouldn't shoo. He was waving his tail and he seemed happy to find me there and he walked right up and rubbed against me, purring very loudly.

I didn't move a muscle. I didn't even bat my eyes. I figured if I didn't move, he might go away. The skunks had been living under the shack for the last three years or so and we got along fine, but we had never been what you'd call real close. I'd left them alone and they'd left me alone and we both were satisfied.

But this happy little critter apparently had made up his mind that I was a friend. Maybe he was just plumb grateful to me for running off the dogs.

He walked around me, rubbing against me, and then he climbed up in my lap and put his feet against my chest and looked me in the face. I could feel his body vibrating with the purring noise that he was making.

He kept standing there, with his feet against my chest, looking in my face, and his purring kept getting soft and loud, fast and slow. His ears stood straight up, like he expected me to purr back at him, and all the time his tail kept up its friendly waving.

Finally I reached up a hand, very gingerly, and patted him on the head and he didn't seem to mind. I sat there quite a while, patting him and him purring at me, and he still was friendly.

So I took a chance and pushed him off my lap.

After a couple of tries, I made it to my feet and walked around the shack, with the skunk following at my heels.

I sat down on the stoop again and reached for the bottle and took a healthy swig, which I really needed after all I had been through, and while I had the bottle tilted, the jet shot across the treeline to the east and zoomed above my clearing and the whole place jumped a foot or two.

I dropped the bottle and grabbed the gun, but the jet was gone before I got the barrel up.

I put down the gun and did some steady cussing.

I had told the colonel only the day before that if that jet ever flew that close above my shack again, I'd take a shot at it and I meant every word of it.

"It don't seem right," I told him. "A man settles down and builds himself a shack and is living peaceable and contented and ain't bothering no one. Then the government comes in and builds an air base just a couple miles away and there ain't no peace no more, with them jets flying no more than stove-pipe high. Sometimes at night

they bring a man plumb out of bed, standing at attention in the middle of the room, with his bare feet on the cold floor."

The colonel had been real nice about it. He had pointed out how we had to have air bases, how our lives depended on the planes that operated out of them and how hard he was trying to arrange the flight patterns so they wouldn't upset folks who lived around the base.

I had told him how the jets were stirring up the skunks and he hadn't laughed, but had been sympathetic, and he told me how, when he was a boy in Texas, he had trapped a lot of skunks. I explained that I wasn't trapping these skunks, but that they were, you might say, sort of living with me, and how I had become attached to them, how I'd lay awake at night and listen to them moving around underneath the shack and when I heard them, I knew I wasn't alone, but was sharing my home with others of God's creatures.

But even so, he wouldn't promise that the jets would stop flying over my place and that was when I told him I'd take a shot at the next one that did.

So he pulled a book out of his desk and read me a law that said it was illegal to shoot at any aircraft, but he didn't scare me none.

So what happens when I lay for a jet? It passes over while I'm taking me a drink.

I quit my cussing when I remembered the bottle, and when I thought of it, I could hear it gurgling. It had rolled underneath the steps and I couldn't get at it right away and I almost went mad listening to it gurgle.

Finally I laid down on my belly and reached underneath the steps and got it, but it had gurgled dry. I tossed it out into the yard and sat down on the steps, glum.

The skunk came out of the darkness and climbed the stairs and sat down beside me. I reached out and patted him kind of absent-minded and he purred back at me. I stopped fretting about the bottle.

"You sure are a funny skunk," I said. "I never knew skunks purred."

We sat there for a while and I told him all about my trouble with the jets, the way a man will when there's nobody better around than an animal to do the listening, and sometimes even when there is.

I wasn't afraid of him no more and I thought how fine it was that one of them had finally gotten friendly. I wondered if maybe, now that the ice was broken, some of them might not come in and live with me instead of living under the shack.

Then I got to thinking what a story I'd have to tell the boys down at the tavern. Then I realized that no matter how much I swore to it, they wouldn't believe a word of what I said. So I decided to take the proof along.

I picked up the friendly skunk and I said to it: “Come along. I want to show you to the boys.”

I bumped against a tree and got tangled up in an old piece of chicken wire out in the yard, but finally made it out front where I had Old Betsy parked.

Betsy wasn’t the newest or the best car ever made, but she was the most faithful that any man could want. Me and her had been through a lot together and we understood each other. We had a sort of bargain—I polished and fed her and she took me where I wanted to go and always brought me back. No reasonable man can ask more of a car than that.

I patted her on the fender and said good evening to her, put the skunk in the front seat and climbed in myself.

Betsy didn’t want to start. She’d rather just stayed home. But I talked to her and babied her and she finally started, shaking and shivering and flapping her fenders.

I eased her into gear and headed her out into the road.

“Now take it easy,” I told her. “The state coppers have got themselves a speed trap set up somewhere along this stretch and we don’t want to take no chances.”

Betsy took it slow and gentle down to the tavern and I parked her there and tucked the skunk under my arm and went into the place.

Charley was behind the bar and there were quite a lot of customers—Johnny Ashland and Skinny Patterson and Jack O’Neill and half a dozen others.

I put the skunk on the bar and it started walking toward them, just like it was eager to make friends with them.

They took one look and they made foxholes under chairs and tables. Charley grabbed a bottle by the neck and backed into a corner.

“Asa,” he yelled, “you take that thing out of here!”

“It’s all right,” I told him. “It’s a friendly cuss.”

“Friendly or not, get the hell out with it!”

“Get it out!” yelled all the customers.

I was plenty sore at them. Imagine being upset at a friendly skunk!

But I could see I was getting nowhere, so I picked it up and took it out to Betsy. I found a gunny sack and made a nest and told it to stay right there, that I’d be right back.

It took me longer than I had intended, for I had to tell my story and they asked a lot of questions and made a lot of jokes and they wouldn’t let me buy, but kept them set up for me.

When I went out, I had some trouble spotting Betsy and then I had to set a course to reach her. It took a little time, but after tacking back and forth before the wind, I finally got close enough in passing to

reach out and grab her.

I had trouble getting in because the door didn't work the way it should, and when I got in, I couldn't find the key. When I found it, I dropped it on the floor, and when I reached down to get it, I fell flat upon the seat. It was so comfortable there that I decided it was foolish to get up. I'd just spend the night there.

While I was lying there, Betsy's engine started and I chuckled. Betsy was disgusted and was going home without me. That's the kind of car she was. Just like a wife'd act.

She backed out and made a turn and headed for the road. At the road, she stopped and looked for other cars, then went out on the highway, heading straight for home.

I wasn't worried any. I knew I could trust Betsy. We'd been through a lot together and she was intelligent, although I couldn't remember she'd ever gone home all by herself before.

I lay there and thought about it and the wonder of it was, I told myself, that it hadn't happened long before.

A man is as close to no machine as he is to his car. A man gets to understand his car and his car gets to understand him and after a time a real affection must grow up between them. So it seemed absolutely natural to me that the day had to come when a car could be trusted just the way a horse or dog is, and that a good car should be as loyal and faithful as any dog or horse.

I lay there feeling happy and Betsy went head high down the road and turned in at the driveway.

But we had no more than stopped when there was a squeal of brakes and I heard a car door open and someone jump out on the gravel.

I tried to get up, but I was a bit slow about it and someone jerked the door open and reached in and grabbed me by the collar and hauled me out.

The man wore the uniform of a state trooper and there was another trooper just a little ways away and the police car stood there with its red light flashing. I wondered why I hadn't noticed it had been following us and then remembered I'd been lying down.

"Who was driving that car?" barked the cop who holding me.

Before I could answer, the other cop looked inside Betsy and jumped back about a dozen feet.

"Slade!" he yelled. "There's a skunk in there!"

"Don't tell me," said Slade, "that the skunk was drivin'."

And the other one said, "At least the skunk is sober."

"You leave that skunk alone!" I told them. "He's a friend of mine. He isn't bothering no one."

I gave a jerk and Slade's hand slipped from my collar and I lunged

for Betsy. My chest hit the seat and I grabbed the steering post and tried to pull myself inside.

Betsy started up with a sudden roar and her wheels spun gravel that hit the police car like machine-gun fire. She lurched forward and crashed through the picket fence, curving for the road. She smashed into the lilac thicket and went through it and I was brushed off.

I lay there, all tangled up with the smashed-down lilac bushes and watched Betsy hit the road and keep on going. She done the best she could, I consoled myself. She had tried to rescue me and it wasn't her fault that I had failed to hang onto her. Now she had to make a run for it herself. And she seemed to be doing pretty well. She sounded and went like she had an engine off a battleship inside her.

The two state troopers jumped into their car and took off in pursuit and I settled down to figure out how to untangle myself from the lilac thicket.

I finally managed it and went over to the front steps of the shack and sat down. I got to thinking about the fence, and decided it wasn't worth repairing. I might just as well uproot it and use what was left of it for kindling.

And I wondered about Betsy and what might be happening to her, but I wasn't really worried. I was pretty sure she could take care of herself.

I was right about that, for in a little while the state troopers came back again and parked in the driveway. They saw me sitting on the steps and came over to me.

"Where's Betsy?" I asked them.

"Betsy who?" Slade asked.

"Betsy is the car," I said.

Slade swore. "Got away. Travelling without lights at a hundred miles an hour. It'll smash into something, sure as hell."

I shook my head at that. "Not Betsy. She knows all the roads for fifty miles around."

Slade thought I was being smart. He grabbed me and jerked me to my feet. "You got a lot to explain." He shoved me at the other trooper and the other trooper caught me. "Toss him in the back seat, Ernie, and let's get going."

Ernie didn't seem to be as sore as Slade. He said: "This way, Pop."

Once they got me in the car, they didn't want to talk with me. Ernie rode in back with me and Slade drove. We hadn't gone a mile when I dozed off.

When I woke up, we were just pulling into the parking area in front of the state police barracks. I got out and tried to walk, but one of them got on each side of me and practically dragged me along.

We went into a sort of office with a desk, some chairs and a

bench. A man sat behind the desk.

"What you got there?" he asked.

"Damned if I know," said Slade, all burned up. "You won't believe it, Captain."

Ernie took me over to a chair and sat me down. "I'll get you some coffee, Pop. We want to talk with you. We have to get you sober."

I thought that was nice of him.

I drank a lot of coffee and I began to see a little better and things were in straight lines instead of going round in circles—things I could see, that is. It was different when I tried to think. Things that had seemed okay before now seemed mighty queer, like Betsy going home all by herself, for instance.

Finally they took me over to the desk and the captain asked me a lot of questions about who I was and how old I was and where I lived, until eventually we got around to what was on their minds.

I didn't hold back anything. I told them about the jets and the skunks and the talk I had with the colonel. I told them about the dogs and the friendly skunk and how Betsy had got disgusted with me and gone home by herself.

"Tell me, Mr. Bayles," said the captain, "are you a mechanic? I know you told me you are a day laborer and work at anything that you can get. But I wonder if you might not tinker around in your spare time, working on your car."

"Captain," I told him truthfully, "I wouldn't know which end of a wrench to grab hold of."

"You never worked on Betsy, then?"

"Just took good care of her."

"Has anyone else ever worked on her?"

"I wouldn't let no one lay a hand on her."

"Then you can't explain how that car could possibly operate by itself?"

"No, sir. Betsy is a smart car, Captain—"

"You're sure you weren't driving?"

"I wasn't driving. I was just taking it easy while Betsy took me home."

The captain threw down his pencil in disgust. "I give up!"

He got up from the desk. "I'm going out and make some more coffee," he said to Slade. "You see what you can do."

"There's one thing," Ernie said to Slade as the captain left. "The skunk—"

"What about the skunk?"

"Skunks don't wave their tails," said Ernie. "Skunks don't purr."

"This skunk did," Slade said sarcastically. "This was a special skunk. This was a ring-tailed wonder of a skunk. Besides, the skunk

hasn't got a thing to do with it. He was just out for a ride."

"You boys haven't got a little nip?" I asked. I was feeling mighty low.

"Sure," said Ernie. He went to a locker in one corner of the room and took out a bottle.

Through the windows, I could see that the east was beginning to brighten. Dawn wasn't far away.

The telephone rang. Slade picked it up.

Ernie motioned to me and I walked across to where he stood by the locker. He handed me the bottle.

"Take it easy, Pop," he advised me. "You don't want to hang one on again."

I took it easy. About a tumbler and a half, I'd reckon.

Slade hollered, "Hey!" at us.

"What's going on?" asked Ernie.

He took the bottle from me, not by force exactly, but almost.

"A farmer found the car," said Slade. "It took a shot at his dog."

"It took a what—a shot at his dog?" Ernie stuttered.

"That's what the fellow says. Went out to get in the cows. Early. Going fishing and was anxious to get the morning chores done. Found what he thought was an abandoned car at the end of a lane."

"And the shot?"

"I'm coming to that. Dog ran up barking. The car shot out a spark —a big spark. It knocked the dog over. He got up and ran. Car shot out another spark. Caught him in the rump. Fellow says the pooch is blistered."

Slade headed for the door. "Come on, the both of you."

"We may need you, Pop," said Ernie.

We ran and piled into the car.

"Where is this farm?" asked Ernie.

"Out west of the air base," said Slade.

The farmer was waiting for us at the barnyard gate. He jumped in when Slade stopped.

"The car's still there," he said. "I been watching. It hasn't come out."

"Any other way it could get out?"

"Nope. Woods and fields is all. That lane is dead end."

Slade grunted in satisfaction. He drove down the road and ran the police car across the mouth of the lane, blocking it entirely.

"We walk from here," he said.

"Right around that bend," the farmer told us.

We walked around the bend and saw it was Betsy, all right.

"That's my car," I said.

"Let's scatter out a bit," said Slade. "It might start shooting at us."

He loosened the gun in his holster.

"Don't you go shooting up my car," I warned him, but he paid me no mind.

Like he said, we scattered out a bit, the four of us, and went toward the car. It seemed funny that we should be acting that way, as if Betsy was an enemy and we were stalking her.

She looked the same as ever, just an old beat-up jalopy that had a lot of sense and a lot of loyalty. And I kept thinking about how she always got me places and always got me back.

Then all at once she charged us. She was headed in the wrong direction and she was backing up, but she charged us just the same.

She gave a little leap and was running at full speed and going faster every second and I saw Slade pull his gun.

I jumped out in the middle of the lane and waved my arms. I didn't trust that Slade. I was afraid that if I couldn't get Betsy stopped, he'd shoot her full of holes.

But Betsy didn't stop. She kept right on charging us and she was going faster than an old wreck like her had any right to go.

"Jump, you fool!" shouted Ernie. "She'll run over you!"

I jumped, but my heart wasn't in the jump. I thought that if things had come to the pass where Betsy'd run me down there wasn't too much left for me to go on living for.

I stubbed my toe and fell flat on my face, but even while I was falling, I saw Betsy leave the ground as if she was going to leap over me. I knew right away that I'd never been in any danger, that Betsy never had any intention of hitting me at all.

She sailed right up into the sky, with her wheels still spinning, as if she was backing up a long, steep hill that was invisible.

I twisted around and sat up and stared at her and she sure was a pretty sight. She was flying just like an airplane. I was downright proud of her.

Slade stood with his mouth open and his gun hanging at his side. He never even tried to fire it. He probably forgot that he even had a gun in his hand.

Betsy went up above the treeline and the Sun made her sparkle and gleam—I'd polished her only the week before last—and I thought how swell it was she had learned to fly.

It was then I saw the jet and I tried to yell a warning for Betsy, but my mouth dried up like there was alum in it and the yell wouldn't come out.

It didn't take more than a second, probably, although it seemed to me that days passed while Betsy hung there and the jet hung there and I knew they would crash.

Then there were pieces flying all over the sky and the jet was

smoking and heading for a cornfield off to the left of us.

I sat there limp in the middle of the lane and watched the pieces that had been Betsy falling back to Earth and I felt sick. It was an awful thing to see.

The pieces came down and you could hear them falling, thudding on the ground, but there was one piece that didn't fall as fast as the others. It just seemed to glide.

I watched, wondering why it glided while all the other pieces fell and I saw it was a fender and that it seemed to be rocking back and forth, as if it wanted to fall, too, only something held it back.

It glided down to the ground near the edge of the woods. It landed easy and rocked a little, then tipped over. And when it tipped over, it spilled something out of it. The thing got up and shook itself and trotted straight into the woods. It was the friendly skunk!

By this time, everyone was running. Ernie was running for the farmhouse to phone the base about the jet and Slade and the farmer were running toward the cornfield, where the jet had plowed a path in the corn wide enough to haul a barn through.

I got up and walked off the lane to where I had seen some pieces falling. I found a few of them—a headlight, the lens not even broken, and a wheel, all caved in and twisted, and the radiator ornament. I knew it was no use. No one could ever get Betsy back together.

I stood there with the radiator ornament in my hand and thought of all the good times Betsy and I had had together—how she'd take me to the tavern and wait until I was ready to go home, and how we'd go fishing and eat a picnic lunch together, and how we'd go up north deer hunting in the fall.

While I was standing there, Slade and the farmer came down from the cornfield with the pilot walking between them. He was sort of rubber-legged and they were holding him up. He had a glassy look in his eyes and he was babbling a bit.

When they reached the lane, they let loose of him and he sat down heavily.

"When the hell," he asked them, "did they start making flying cars?"

They didn't answer him. Instead, Slade yelled at me, "Hey, Pop! You leave that wreckage alone. Don't touch none of it."

"I got a right to touch it," I told him. "It's my car."

"You leave it alone! There's something funny going on here. That junk might tell us what it is if no one monkeys with it."

So I dropped the radiator ornament and went back to the lane.

The four of us sat down and waited. The pilot seemed to be all right. He had a cut above one eye and some blood had run down across his face, but that was all that was the matter with him. He

asked for a cigarette and Slade gave him one and lit it.

Down at the end of the lane, we heard Ernie backing the police car out of the way. Pretty soon he came walking up to us.

"They'll be here right away."

He sat down with us. We didn't say anything about what had happened. I guess we were all afraid to talk.

In less than fifteen minutes, the air base descended on us. First there was an ambulance and they loaded the pilot aboard and left in a lot of dust.

Behind the ambulance was a fire rig and behind the fire rig was a jeep with the colonel in it. Behind the colonel's jeep were other jeeps and three or four trucks, all loaded with men, and in less time than it takes to tell it, the place was swarming.

The colonel was red in the face and you could see he was upset. After all, why wouldn't he be? This was the first time a plane had ever collided in mid-air with a car.

The colonel came tramping up to Slade and he started hollering at Slade and Slade hollered right back at him and I wondered why they were sore at one another, but that wasn't it at all. That was just the way they talked when they got excited.

All around, there was a lot of running here and there and a lot more hollering, but it didn't last too long. Before the colonel got through yelling back and forth with Slade, the entire area was ringed in with men and the situation was in Air Force hands.

When the colonel finished talking with Slade, he walked over to me.

"So it was your car," he said. The way he said it, you'd thought it was my fault.

"Yes, it was," I told him, "and I'm going to sue you. That was a darn good car."

The colonel went on looking at me as if I had no right to live, then suddenly seemed to recognize me.

"Say, wait a minute," he said. "Weren't you in to see me the other day?"

"I sure was. I told you about my skunks. It was one of them that was in Old Betsy."

"Hold up there, old-timer," said the colonel. "You lost me. Let's hear that again."

"Old Betsy was the car," I explained, "and the skunk was in her. When your jet crashed into it, he rode a fender down."

"You mean the skunk—the fender—the—"

"It just sort of floated down," I finished telling him.

"Corporal," the colonel said to Slade, "have you further use for this man?"

"Just drunkenness," said Slade. "Not worth mentioning."

"I'd like to take him back to the base with me."

"I'd appreciate it," Slade said in a quivery kind of voice.

"Come on, then," said the colonel and I followed him to the jeep.

We sat in the back seat and a soldier drove and he didn't waste no time. The colonel and I didn't talk much. We just hung on and hoped that we'd live through it. At least, that's the way I felt.

Back at the base, the colonel sat down at his desk and pointed at a chair for me to sit in. Then he leaned back and studied me. I was sure glad I had done nothing wrong, for the way he looked at me, I'd just have had to up and confess it if I had.

"You said some queer things back there," the colonel started. "Now suppose you just rear back comfortable in that chair and tell me all about it, not leaving out a thing."

So I told him all about it and I went into a lot of detail to explain my viewpoint and he didn't interrupt, but just kept listening. He was the best listener I ever ran across.

When I was all finished, he reached for a pad and pencil.

"Let's get a few points down," he said. "You say the car had never operated by itself before?"

"Not that I know of," I answered honestly. "It might have practiced while I wasn't looking, of course."

"And it never flew before?"

I shook my head.

"And when it did both of these things, there was this skunk of yours aboard?"

"That's right."

"And you say this skunk glided down in a fender after the crash?"

"The fender tipped over and the critter ran into the woods."

"Don't you think it's a little strange that the fender should glide down when all the other wreckage fell ker-plunk?"

I admitted that it did seem slightly strange.

"Now about this skunk. You say it purred?"

"It purred real pretty."

"And waved its tail?"

"Just like a dog," I said.

The colonel pushed the pad away and leaned back in his chair. He crossed his arms and sort of hugged himself.

"As a matter of personal knowledge," he told me, "gained from years of boyhood trapping, I can tell you that no skunk purrs or ever wags its tail."

"I know what you're thinking," I said, indignant, "but I wasn't that drunk. I'd had a drink or two to while away the time I was waiting for the jet. But I saw the skunk real plain and I knew he was a

skunk and I can remember that he purred. He was a friendly cuss. He acted as if he liked me and he—"

"Okay," the colonel said. "Okay."

We sat there looking at one another. All at once, he grinned.

"You know," he said, "I find quite suddenly that I need an aide."

"I ain't joining up," I replied stubbornly. "You couldn't get me within a quarter mile of one of them jets. Not if you roped and tied me."

"A civilian aide. Three hundred a month and keep."

"Colonel, I don't hanker none for the military life."

"And all the liquor you can drink."

"Where do I sign?" I asked.

And that is how I got to be the colonel's aide.

I thought he was crazy and I still think so. He'd been a whole lot better off if he'd quit right there. But he had an idea by the tail and he was the kind of gambling fool who'd ride a hunch to death.

We got along just fine, although at times we had our differences. The first one was over that foolish business about confining me to base. I raised quite a ruckus, but he made it stick.

"You'd go out and get slobbered up and gab your head off," he told me. "I want you to button up your lip and keep it buttoned up. Why else do you think I hired you?"

It wasn't so bad. There wasn't a blessed thing to do. I never had to lift my hand to do a lick of work. The chow was fit to eat and I had a place to sleep and the colonel kept his word about all the liquor I could drink.

For several days, I saw nothing of him. Then one afternoon, I dropped around to pass the time of day. I hadn't more than got there when a sergeant came in with a bunch of papers in his hand. He seemed to be upset.

"Here's the report on that car, sir," he said.

The colonel took the papers and leafed through a few of them. "Sergeant, I can't make head nor tail of this."

"Some of it I can't, either, sir."

"Now this?" said the colonel, pointing.

"That's a computer, sir."

"Cars don't have computers."

"Well, sir, that's what I said, too. But we found the place where it was attached to the engine block."

"Attached? Welded?"

"Well, not exactly welded. Like it was a part of the block. Like it had been cast as a part of it. There was no sign of welding."

"You're sure it's a computer?"

"Connally said it was, sir. He knows about computers. But it's not

like any he's ever seen before. It works on a different principle than any he has seen, he says. But he says it makes a lot of sense, sir. The principle, that is. He says—"

"Well, go on!" the colonel yelled.

"He says its capacity is at least a thousand times that of the best computer that we have. He says it might not be stretching your imagination too far to say that it's intelligent."

"How do you mean—intelligent?"

"Well, Connally says a rig like that might be capable of thinking for itself, sir."

"My God!" the colonel said.

He sat there for a minute, as if he might be thinking. Then he turned a page and pointed at something else.

"That's another part, sir," the sergeant said. "A drawing of the part. We don't know what it is."

"Don't know!"

"We never saw anything like it, sir. We don't have any idea what it might be for. It was attached to the transmission, sir."

"And this?"

"That's an analysis of the gasoline. Funny thing about that, sir. We found the tank, all twisted out of shape, but there was some gas still left in it. It hadn't—"

"But why an analysis?"

"Because it's not gasoline, sir. It is something else. It was gasoline, but it's been changed, sir."

"Is that all, Sergeant?"

The sergeant, I could see, was beginning to sweat a little. "No, sir, there's more to it. It's all in that report. We got most all the wreckage, sir. Just bits here and there are missing. We are working now on reassembling it."

"Reassembling—"

"Maybe, sir, pasting it back together is a better way to put it."

"It will never run again?"

"I don't think so, sir. It's pretty well smashed up. But if it could be put back together whole, it would be the best car that was ever made. The speedometer says 80,000 miles, but it's in new-car condition. And there are alloys in it that we can't even guess at."

The sergeant paused. "If you'll permit me, sir, it's a very funny business."

"Yes, indeed," the colonel said. "Thank you, Sergeant. A very funny business."

The sergeant turned to leave.

"Just a minute," said the colonel.

"Yes, sir."

"I'm sorry about this, Sergeant, but you and the entire detail that was assigned to the car are restricted to the base. I don't want this leaking out. Tell your men, will you? I'll make it tough on anyone who talks."

"Yes, sir," the sergeant said, saluting very polite, but looking like he could have slit the colonel's throat.

When the sergeant was gone, the colonel said to me: "Asa, if there's something that you should say now and you fail to say it and it comes out later and makes a fool of me, I'll wring your scrawny little neck."

"Cross my heart," I said.

He looked at me funny. "Do you know what that skunk was?"

I shook my head.

"It wasn't any skunk," he said. "I guess it's up to us to find out what it is."

"But it isn't here. It ran into the woods."

"It could be hunted down."

"Just you and me?"

"Why just you and me when there are two thousand men right on this base?"

"But—"

"You mean they wouldn't take too kindly to hunting down a skunk?"

"Something like that, Colonel. They might go out, but they wouldn't hunt. They'd try not to find it."

"They'd hunt if there was five thousand dollars waiting for the man who brought the right one in."

I looked at him as if he'd gone off his rocker.

"Believe me," said the colonel, "it would be worth it. Every penny of it."

I told you he was crazy.

I didn't go out with the skunk hunters. I knew just how little chance there was of ever finding it. It could have gotten clear out of the county by that time or found a place to hole up where one would never find it.

And, anyhow, I didn't need five thousand. I was drawing down good pay and drinking regular.

The next day, I dropped in to see the colonel. The medical officer was having words with him.

"You got to call it off!" the sawbones shouted.

"I can't call it off," the colonel yelled. "I have to have that animal."

"You ever see a man who tried to catch a skunk bare-handed?"

"No, I never have."

“I got eleven of them now,” the sawbones said. “I won’t have any more of it.”

“Captain,” said the colonel, “you may have a lot more than eleven before this is all over.”

“You mean you won’t call it off, sir?”

“No, I won’t.”

“Then I’ll have it stopped.”

“Captain!” said the colonel and his voice was deadly.

“You’re insane,” the sawbones said. “No court martial in the land __”

“Captain.”

But the captain did not answer. He turned straight around and left.

The colonel looked at me. “It’s sometimes tough,” he said.

I knew that someone better find that skunk or the colonel’s name was mud.

“What I don’t understand,” I said, “is why you want that skunk. He’s just a skunk that purrs.”

The colonel sat down at his desk and put his head between his hands.

“My God,” he moaned, “how stupid can men get?”

“Pretty stupid,” I told him, “but I still don’t understand—”

“Look,” the colonel said, “someone jiggered up that car of yours. You say you didn’t do it. You say no one else could have done it. The boys who are working on it say there’s stuff in it that’s not been even thought of.”

“If you think that skunk—”

The colonel raised his fist and smacked it on the desk.

“Not a skunk! Something that *looks* like a skunk! Something that knows more about machines than you or I or any human being will ever get to know!”

“But it hasn’t got no hands. How could it do what you think?”

He never got to answer. The door burst in and two of the saddest sacks outside the guardhouse stumbled in. They didn’t bother to salute.

“Colonel, sir,” one of them said, heaving hard. “Colonel, sir, we got one. We didn’t even have to catch it. We whistled at it and it followed us.”

The skunk walked in behind them, waving its tail and purring. It walked right over to me and rubbed against my legs. When I reached down and picked it up, it purred so loud I was afraid it would go ahead and explode.

“That the one?” the colonel asked me.

“He’s the one,” I said.

The colonel grabbed the phone. “Get me Washington. General Sanders. At the Pentagon.”

He waved his hand at us. “Get out of here!”

“But, Colonel, sir, the money—”

“You’ll get it. Now get out of here.”

He looked exactly like you might imagine a man might look right after he’s been told he’s not going to be shot at dawn.

We turned around and got out of there.

At the door, four of the toughest-looking hombres this side of Texas were waiting, with rifles in their hands.

“Don’t pay no attention to us, Mac,” one of them said to me. “We’re just your bodyguards.”

They were my bodyguards, all right. They went every place I went. And the skunk went with me, too. That, of course, was why they stuck around. They didn’t care a rap about me. It was the skunk that was getting the bodyguarding.

And that skunk stuck closer to me than paper to the wall. He followed at my heels and walked between my feet, but mostly he wanted me to carry him or to let him perch on my shoulder. And he purred all the blessed time. Either he figured I was the only true friend he had or he thought I was a soft touch.

Life got a little complicated. The skunk slept with me and the four guards stayed in the room. The skunk and one of the guards went to the latrine with me while the others kept close. I had no privacy at all. I said it wasn’t decent. I said it was unconstitutional. It didn’t make no difference. There was nothing I could do. There were, it turned out, twelve of them guards and they worked in eight-hour shifts.

For a couple of days, I didn’t see the colonel and I thought it was funny how he couldn’t rest until he’d found the skunk and then paid no attention to it.

I did a lot of thinking about what the colonel had said about the skunk not being a skunk at all, but something that only looked like a skunk and how it might know more, some ways, than we did. And the more I lived with it, the more I began to believe that he might be right. Although it still seemed impossible that any critter without hands could know much about machinery in the first place, let alone do anything about it.

Then I got to remembering how me and Betsy had understood each other and I carried that a little further, imagining how a man and machine might get to know one another so well, they could even talk together and how the man, even if he didn’t have hands, might help the machine to improve itself. And while it sounds somewhat far-fetched just telling it, thinking of it in the secrecy of one’s mind made it sound all right and it gave a sort of warm feeling to imagine that

one could get to be downright personal friendly with machines.

When you come to think of it, it's not so far-fetched, either.

Perhaps, I told myself, when I had gone into the tavern and had left the skunk bedded down in Betsy, the skunk might have looked her over and felt sorry for such a heap of junk, like you or I would feel sorry for a homeless cat or an injured dog. And maybe the skunk had set out, right then and there, to fix her up as best he could, probably cannibalizing some metal here and there, from places where it would not be missed, to grow the computer and the other extra pieces on her.

Probably he couldn't understand, for the life of him, why they'd been left off to start with. Maybe, to him, a machine was no machine at all without those pieces on it. More than likely, he thought Betsy was just a botched-up job.

The guards began calling the skunk Stinky and that was a libel because he never stunk a bit, but was one of the best-mannered, even-tempered animals that I have ever been acquainted with. I told them it wasn't right, but they just laughed at me, and before long the whole base knew about the name and everywhere we went they'd yell "Hi, Stinky" at us. He didn't seem to mind, so I began to think of him as Stinky, too.

I got it figured out to my own satisfaction that maybe Stinky could have fixed up Betsy and even why he fixed up Betsy. But the one thing I couldn't figure out was where he'd come from to start with. I thought on it a lot and came up with no answers except some foolish ones that were too much for even me to swallow.

I went over to see the colonel a couple of times, but the sergeants and the lieutenants threw me out before I could get to see him. So I got sore about it and decided not to go there any more until he sent for me.

One day, he did send for me and when I got there, the place was crowded with a lot of brass. The colonel was talking to an old gray-haired, eagle-beaked gent who had a fierce look about him and a rat-trap jaw and was wearing stars.

"General," said the colonel, "may I introduce Stinky's special friend?"

The general shook hands with me. Stinky, who was riding on my shoulder, purred at him.

The general took a good look at Stinky.

"Colonel," he said, "I hope to God you're right. Because if you aren't and this business ever leaks, the Air Force goose is cooked. The Army and the Navy would never let us live it down and what Congress would do to us would be a crimson shame."

The colonel gulped a little. "Sir, I'm sure I'm right."

“I don’t know why I let myself get talked into this,” the general said. “It’s the most hare-brained scheme I have ever heard of.”

He had another squint at Stinky.

“He looks like a common skunk to me,” the general said.

The colonel introduced me to a bunch of other colonels and a batch of majors, but he didn’t bother with the captains if there were any there and I shook hands with them and Stinky purred at them and everything was cozy.

One of the colonels picked up Stinky, but he kicked up quite a fuss trying to get back to me.

The general said to me, “You seem to be the one he wants to be with.”

“He’s a friend of mine,” I explained.

“I be damned,” the general said.

After lunch, the colonel and the general came for me and Stinky and we went over to a hangar. The place had been cleared out and there was only one plane in it, one of the newer jets. There was a mob of people waiting for us, some of them military, but a lot of them were technicians in ordinary clothes or in dungarees. Some of them had clipboards tucked under their arms and some were carrying tools or what I imagined must be tools, although never before have I ever seen contraptions such as those. And there were different pieces of equipment scattered here and there.

“Now, Asa,” the colonel said to me, “I want you to get into that jet with Stinky.”

“And do what?” I asked.

“Just get in and sit. But don’t touch anything. You might get the detail all fouled up.”

It seemed a funny business and I hesitated.

“Don’t be afraid,” the general assured me. “There won’t nothing happen. You just get in and sit.”

So I did and it was a foolish business. I climbed up where the pilots sit and sat down in his seat and it was a crazy-looking place. There were instruments and gadgets and doodads all over. I was almost afraid to move for fear of touching one of them because God knows what might have happened if I had.

I got in and sat and I kept myself interested for a time by just looking at all the stuff and trying to figure out what it was for, but I never rightly got much of it figured out.

But finally I had looked at everything a hundred times and puzzled over it and there wasn’t anything more to do and I was awful bored. But I remembered all the money I was pulling down and the free drinking I was getting and I thought if a man just had to sit in a certain place to earn it, why, it was all right.

Stinky didn't pay any attention to any of the stuff. He settled down in my lap and went to sleep, or at least he seemed to go to sleep. He took it easy, for a fact. Once in a while, he opened an eye or twitched an ear, but that was all he did.

I hadn't thought much about it at first, but after I'd sat there for an hour or so, I began to get an idea of why they wanted me and Stinky in the plane. They figured, I told myself, that if they put Stinky in the ship, he might feel sorry for it, too, and do the same kind of job on it as he had done on Betsy. But if that was what they thought, they sure were getting fooled, for Stinky didn't do a thing except curl up and go to sleep.

We sat there for several hours and finally they told us that we could get out.

And that is how Operation Stinky got off to a start. That is what they called all that foolishness. It does beat hell, the kind of names the Air Force can think up.

It went on like that for several days. Me and Stinky would go out in the morning and sit in a plane for several hours, then take a break for noon, then go back for a few hours more. Stinky didn't seem to mind. He'd just as soon be there as anywhere. All he'd do would be curl up in my lap and in five minutes he'd be dozing.

As the days went on, the general and the colonel and all the technicians who cluttered up the hangar got more and more excited. They didn't say a word, but you could see they were aching to bust out, only they held it back. And I couldn't understand that, for as far as I could see, there was nothing whatsoever happening.

Apparently their work didn't end when Stinky and I left. Evening after evening, lights burned in the hangar and a gang was working there and they had guards around three deep.

One day they pulled out the jet we had been sitting in and hauled in another and we sat in that and it was just the same as it had been before. Nothing really happened. And yet the air inside that hangar was so filled with tension and excitement, you could fairly light a fire with it.

It sure beat me what was going on.

Gradually the same sort of tension spread throughout the entire base and there were some funny goings-on. You never saw an outfit that was faster on its toes. A construction gang moved in and started to put up buildings and as soon as one of them was completed, machinery was installed. More and more people kept arriving until the base began to look like an anthill with a hotfoot.

On one of the walks I took, with the guards trailing along beside me, I found out something else that made my eyes bug. They were installing a twelve-foot woven fence, topped with barbed wire, all

around the area.

And inside the fence, there were so many guards, they almost walked on one another.

I was a little scared when I got back from the walk, because from what I saw, this thing I'd been pitchforked into was bigger and more important than I had ever dreamed. Up until then, I'd figured it was just a matter of the colonel having his neck stuck out so far, he could never pull it back. All along, I had been feeling sorry for him because that general looked like the kind of gent who would stand for just so much tomfoolery before he lowered the boom.

It was about this time that they began to dig a big pit out in the center of one of the runways. I went over one day to watch it and it didn't make no sense at all. Here they had a nice, smooth runway they'd spent a lot of money to construct and now they were digging it up to make what looked like a swimming pool. I asked around about it, but the people that I talked to either didn't know or they weren't talking.

Me and Stinky kept on sitting in the planes. We were on our sixth one now. And there wasn't any change. I sat, bored stiff, while Stinky took it easy.

One evening the colonel sent a sergeant over to say he'd like to see me.

I went in and sat down and put Stinky on the desk. He lay down on top of it and looked from one to the other of us.

"Asa," said the colonel, "I think we got it made."

"You mean you been getting stuff?"

"We've got enough we actually understand to give us unquestioned air superiority. We're a good ten years, if not a hundred, depending on how much we can use, ahead of the rest of them. They'll never catch us now."

"But all Stinky did was sleep!"

"All he did," the colonel said, "was to redesign each ship. In some instances, there were principles involved that don't make a bit of sense, but I'll bet they will later. And in other cases, what he did was so simple and so basic that we're wondering why we never thought of it ourselves."

"Colonel, what is Stinky?"

"I don't know," he said.

"You got an idea, though."

"Sure, an idea. But that's all it is. It embarrasses me even to think of it."

"I don't embarrass easy."

"Okay, then—Stinky is like nothing on Earth. My guess is that he's from some other planet, maybe even some other solar system. I

think he crossed space to us. How or why, I have no notion. His ship might have been wrecked and he got into a lifeboat and made it here."

"But if there was a lifeboat—"

"We've combed every foot of ground for miles around."

"And no lifeboat?"

"No lifeboat," said the colonel.

Getting that idea down took a little doing, but I did it. Then I got to wondering about something else.

"Colonel," I said, "you claim Stinky fixed up the ships, made them even better. Now how could he have done that with no hands and just sleeping and never touching a thing?"

"You tell me," said the colonel. "I've heard a bunch of guesses. The only one that makes any kind of sense—and cockeyed sense at that—is telekinesis."

I sat there and admired that word. "What's it mean, Colonel?" I wanted to use it on the boys at the tavern, if I ever got back there, and I wanted to get it right.

"Moving things by the power of thought," he said.

"But there wasn't nothing moved," I objected. "All the improvements in Betsy and the planes came from right inside them, not stuff moved in."

"That could be done by telekinesis, too."

I shook my head, thoughtful-like. "Ain't the way I see it."

"Go ahead," he sighed. "Let's hear your theory. No reason you should be an exception."

"I think Stinky's got a kind of mental green thumb for machines," I said. "Like some people got green thumbs for plants, only he's got—"

The colonel took a long, hard frown at me. Then he nodded very slowly. "I see what you mean. Those new parts weren't moved in or around. They were *grown."*

"Something like that. Maybe he can make a machine come kind of alive and improve itself, grow parts that'll make it a better and happier and more efficient machine."

"Sounds silly when you say it," the colonel said, "but it makes a lot more sense than any of the other ideas. Man's been working with machines—real machines, that is—only a century or two. Make that ten thousand or a million years and it might not seem so silly."

We sat in silence while the twilight crept into the room and I think the both of us must have been thinking the same thing. Thinking of the black night that lay out beyond Earth and of how Stinky must have crossed it. And wondering, too, about what kind of world he came from and why he might have left it and what happened to him out in the long dark that forced him to look for asylum on Earth.

Thinking, too, I guess, about the ironic circumstance that had cast

him on a planet where his nearest counterpart was a little animal that no one cared to have much to do with.

"What I can't understand," the colonel said, "is why he does it. Why does he do it for us?"

"He doesn't do it for us," I answered. "He does it for the planes. He feels sorry for them."

The door burst open and the general came tramping in. He was triumphant. Dusk had crept into the room and I don't think he saw me.

"We got an okay!" he gloated. "The ship will be in tomorrow. The Pentagon agrees!"

"General," said the colonel, "we're pushing this too hard. It's time for us to begin to lay some sort of grounds for basic understanding. We've grabbed what we can grab the quickest. We've exploited this little cuss right up to the hilt. We have a lot of data—"

"Not all we need!" the general bellowed. "What we have been doing has been just sort of practice. We have no data on the A-ship. That is where we need it."

"What we need as well is an understanding of this creature. An understanding of how he does it. If we could talk to him—"

"Talk!" the general shouted.

"Yes, talk!" the colonel shouted back. "He keeps purring all the time. That may be his means of communication. The men who found him simply whistled and he came. That was communication. If we had a little patience—"

"We have no time for patience, Colonel."

"General, we can't simply wring him dry. He's done a lot for us. Let's give the little guy a break. He's the one who has had the patience —waiting for us to communicate with him, hoping that someday we'll recognize him for what he is!"

They were yelling at one another and the colonel must have forgotten I was there. It was embarrassing. I held out my arms to Stinky and he jumped into them. I tiptoed across the room and went out as quietly as I could.

That night, I lay in bed with Stinky curled up on the covers at my feet. The four guards sat in the room, quiet as watchful mice.

I thought about what the colonel had said to the general and my heart went out to Stinky. I thought how awful it would be if a man suddenly was dumped into a world of skunks who didn't care a rap about him except that he could dig the deepest and slickest burrows that skunks had ever seen and that he could dig them quick. And there were so many burrows to be dug that not one of the skunks would take the time to understand this man, to try to talk with him or to help him out.

I lay there feeling sorry and wishing there was something I could do. Then Stinky came walking up the covers and crawled in under them with me and I put out my hand and held him tight against me while he purred softly at me. And that is how we went to sleep.

The next afternoon, the A-ship arrived. The last of three that had been built, it was still experimental. It was a monster and we stood far back behind a line of guards and watched it come mushing down, settling base-first into the water-filled rocket pit they'd dug out on the runway. Finally it was down and it stood there, a bleak, squat thing that somehow touched one with awe just to look at it.

The crew came down the ladder and the launch went out to get them. They were a bunch of cocky youngsters and you could sense the pride in them.

Next morning, we went out to the ship. I rode in the launch with the general and the colonel, and while the boat bobbed against the ladder, they had another difference of opinion.

"I still think it's too risky, General," said the colonel. "It's all right to fool around with jets, but an atomic ship is a different matter. If Stinky goes fooling with that pile—"

The general said, tight-lipped: "We have to take the chance."

The colonel shrugged and went up the ladder. The general motioned to me and I went up with Stinky perched on my shoulder. The general followed.

Whereas Stinky and I before this had been in a ship alone, this time a picked crew of technicians came aboard as well. There was plenty of room and it was the only way they could study what Stinky might be doing. And I imagined that, with an A-ship, they'd want to keep close check.

I sat down in the pilot's chair and Stinky settled himself in my lap. The colonel stayed with us for a while, but after a time he left and we were alone.

I was nervous. What the colonel had said made good sense to me. But the day wore on and nothing happened and I began to feel that perhaps the colonel had been wrong.

It went on for four days like that and I settled into routine. I wasn't nervous any longer. We could depend on Stinky, I told myself. He wouldn't do anything to harm us.

By the way the technicians were behaving and the grin the general wore, I knew that Stinky must be performing up to expectations.

On the fifth day, as we were going out, the colonel said: "This should wind it up."

I was glad to hear it.

We were almost ready to knock off for noon when it happened. I

can't tell you exactly how it was, for it was a bit confusing. It was almost as if someone had shouted, although no one had. I half rose out of the chair, then sat back again. And someone shouted once more.

I knew that something was about to happen. I could feel it in my bones. I knew I had to get out of the A-ship and get out fast. It was fear—unreasoning fear. And over and above the fear, I knew I could not leave. It was my job to stay. I had to stick it out. I grabbed the chair arms and hung on and tried my best to stay.

Then the panic hit me and there was nothing I could do. There was no way to fight it. I leaped out of the chair, dumping Stinky from my lap. I reached the door and fought it open, then turned back.

"Stinky!" I shouted.

I started across the room to reach him, but halfway across the panic hit me again and I turned and bolted in blind flight.

I went clattering down the catwalk and from below me came the sound of running and the yells of frightened men. I knew then that I had been right, that I had not been cowardly altogether—there was something wrong.

Men were pouring out of the port of the big A-ship when I got there and scrambling down the ladder. The launch was coming out to pick them up. One man fell off the ladder into the water and began to swim.

Out on the field, ambulances and fire rigs were racing toward the water pit and the siren atop the operations building was wailing like a stepped-on tomcat.

I looked at the faces around me. They were set and white and I knew that all the men were just as scared as I was and somehow, instead of getting scareder, I got a lot of comfort from it.

They went on tumbling down the ladder and more men fell in the drink, and I have no doubt at all that if someone had held a stopwatch on them, there'd have been swimming records falling.

I got in line to wait my turn and I thought again of Stinky and stepped out of line and started back to save him. But halfway up the catwalk, my courage ran plumb out and I was too scared to go on. The funny thing about it was that I didn't have the least idea what there was to scare me.

I went down the ladder among the last of them and piled into the launch, which was loaded so heavily that it barely crept back to solid ground.

The medical officer was running around and shouting to get the swimmers into decontamination and men were running everywhere and shouting and the fire rigs stood there racing their motors while the siren went on shrieking.

"Get back!" someone was shouting. "Run! Everybody back!"

So, of course, we ran like a flock of spooked sheep.

Then a wordless yell went up and we turned around.

The atomic ship was rising slowly from the pit. Beneath it, the water seethed and boiled. The ship rose steadily, gracefully, without a single shudder or shake. It went straight up into the sky, up and out of sight.

Suddenly I realized that I was standing in dead silence. No one was stirring. No one was making any noise. Everybody just stood and stared into the sky. The siren had shut off.

I felt someone tap me on the shoulder. It was the general.

"Stinky?" he asked.

"He wouldn't come," I answered, feeling low. "I was too scared to go and get him."

The general wheeled and headed off across the field. For no reason I can think of, I turned and followed him. He broke into a run and I loped along beside him.

We stormed into operations and went piling up the stairs to the tracking room.

The general bellowed: "You got a fix on it?"

"Yes, sir, we're tracking it right now."

"Good," the general said, breathing heavily. "Fine. We'll have to run it down. Tell me where it's headed."

"Straight out, sir. It still is heading out."

"How far?"

"About five thousand miles, sir."

"But it can't do that!" the general roared. "It can't navigate in space!"

He turned around and bumped into me.

"Get out of my way!" He went thumping down the stairs.

I followed him down, but outside the building I went another way. I passed administration and there was the colonel standing outside. I wasn't going to stop, but he called to me. I went over.

"He made it," said the colonel.

"I tried to take him off," I said, "but he wouldn't come."

"Of course not. What do you think it was that drove us from the ship?"

I thought back and there was only one answer. "Stinky?"

"Sure. It wasn't only machines, Asa, though he did wait till he got hold of something like the A-ship that he could make go out into space. But he had to get us off it first, so he threw us off."

I did some thinking about that, too. "Then he *was* kind of like a skunk."

"How do you mean?" asked the colonel, squinting at me.

"I never did get used to calling him Stinky. Never seemed right

somehow, him not having a smell and still having that name. But he did have a smell—a mental one, I guess you'd say—enough to drive us right out of the ship."

The colonel nodded. "All the same, I'm glad he made it." He stared up at the sky.

"So am I," I said.

Although I was a little sore at Stinky as well. He could have said good-bye at least to me. I was the best friend he had on Earth and driving me out along with the other men seemed plain rude.

But now I'm not so sure.

I still don't know which end of a wrench to take hold of, but I have a new car now—bought it with the money I earned at the air base—and it can run all by itself. On quiet country roads, that is. It gets jittery in traffic. It's not half as good as Betsy.

I could fix that, all right. I found out when the car rose right over a fallen tree in the road. With what rubbed off on me from being with Stinky all the time, I could make it fly. But I won't. I ain't aiming to get treated the way Stinky was.

Green Thumb

Who better than a county agent—a sort of local government functionary whose job it is to aid farmers with a variety of problems—to deal with intelligent plants from space?

"Green Thumb" was submitted to H. L. Gold of Galaxy Science Fiction *in February 1954. Gold purchased it for three hundred dollars, and the story was published in the July 1954 issue of the magazine. The story is only one of a number of Simak stories that displayed the intrigue he felt for the concept of plant intelligence.*

—dww

I had come back from lunch and was watching the office while Millie went out to get a bite to eat. With my feet up on the desk in a comfortable position, I was giving considerable attention to how I might outwit a garbage-stealing dog.

The dog and I had carried on a feud for months and I was about ready to resort to some desperate measures.

I had blocked up the can with heavy concrete blocks so he couldn't tip it over, but he was a big dog and could stand up and reach down into the can and drag all the garbage out. I had tried putting a heavy weight on the lid, but he simply dragged it off and calmly proceeded with his foraging. I had waited up and caught him red-handed at it and heaved some rocks and whatever else was handy at him, but he recognized tactics such as these for what they were and they didn't bother him. He'd come back in half an hour, calm as ever.

I had considered setting a light muskrat trap on top of the garbage so that, when he reached down into the can, he'd get his muzzle caught. But if I did that, sure as hell I'd forget to take it out some Tuesday morning and the garbage man would get caught instead. I had toyed with the idea of wiring the can so the dog would get an electric shock when he came fooling around. But I didn't know how to go about wiring it and, if I did, ten to one I'd fix it up so I'd electrocute him instead of just scaring him off, and I didn't want to kill him.

I like dogs, you understand. That doesn't mean I have to like *all* dogs, does it? And if you had to scrape up garbage every morning, you'd be just as sore at the mutt as I was.

While I was wondering if I couldn't put something in a particularly tempting bit of garbage that would make him sick and still not kill him, the phone rang.

It was old Pete Skinner out on Acorn Ridge.

"Could you come out?" he asked.

"Maybe," I said. "What you got?"

"I got a hole out in the north forty."

"Sink-hole?"

"Nope. Looks like someone dug it out and carried off the dirt."

"Who would do that, Pete?"

"I don't know. And that ain't all of it. They left a pile of sand beside the hole."

"Maybe that's what they dug out of the hole."

"You know well enough," said Pete, "that I haven't any sandy soil. You've run tests enough on it. All of mine is clay."

"I'll be right out," I told him.

A county agent gets some funny calls, but this one topped them all. Hog cholera, corn borers, fruit blight, milk production records—any of these would have been down my alley. But a hole in the north forty?

And yet, I suppose I should have taken it as a compliment that Pete called me. When you've been a county agent for fifteen years, a lot of farmers get to trust you and some of them, like Pete, figure you can straighten out any problem. I enjoy a compliment as much as anybody. It's the headaches that go with them that I don't like.

When Millie came back, I drove out to Pete's place, which is only four or five miles out of town.

Pete's wife told me that he was up in the north forty, so I went there and found not only Pete, but some of his neighbors. All of them were looking at the hole and doing a lot of talking. I never saw a more puzzled bunch of people.

The hole was about 30 feet in diameter and about 35 feet deep, an almost perfect cone—not the kind of hole you'd dig with a pick and shovel. The sides were cut as clean as if they'd been machined, but the soil was not compressed, as it would have been if machinery had been used.

The pile of sand lay just a short distance from the hole. Looking at it, I had the insane feeling that, if you shoveled that sand into the hole, it would exactly fit. It was the whitest sand I've ever seen and, when I walked over to the pile and picked up some of it, I saw that it was clean. Not just ordinary clean, but *absolutely* clean—as though laundered grain by grain.

I stood around for a while, like the rest of them, staring at the hole and the pile of sand and wishing I could come up with some bright idea. But I wasn't able to. There was the hole and there was the sand. The topsoil was dry and powdery and would have shown wheel marks or any other kind it there's been any. There weren't.

I told Pete maybe he'd better fence in the whole business, because the sheriff or somebody from the state, or even the university, might want to look it over. Pete said that was a good idea and he'd do it right away.

I went back to the farmhouse and asked Mrs. Skinner to give me a couple of fruit jars. One of them I filled with a sample from the sand pile and the other with soil from the hole, being careful not to jolt the walls.

By this time, Pete and a couple of the neighbors had gotten a wagonload of fence posts and some wire and were coming out to the field. I waited and helped unload the posts and wire, then drove back to the office, envying Pete. He was satisfied to put up the fence and let me worry about the problem.

I found three fellows waiting for me. I gave Millie the fruit jars and asked her to send them right away to the Soils Bureau at the State Farm Campus. Then I settled down to work.

Other people drifted in and it was late in the afternoon before I could call up the Soils Bureau and tell them I wanted the contents of the two jars analyzed. I told them a little of what had happened, although not all of it for, when you tried to put it into words, it sounded pretty weird.

"Banker Stevens called and asked if you'd drop by his place on your way home," Millie told me.

"What would Stevens want with me?" I asked. "He isn't a farmer and I don't owe him any money."

"He grows fancy flowers," said Millie.

"I know that. He lives just up the street from me."

"From what I gathered, something awful happened to them. He was all broken up."

So, on the way home, I stopped at the Stevens place. The banker was out in the yard, waiting for me. He looked terrible. He led me around to the big flower garden in the back and never have I seen such utter devastation. In that whole area, there wasn't a single plant alive. Every one of them had given up the ghost and was lying wilted on the ground.

"What could have done it, Joe?" asked Stevens and, the way he said it, I felt sorry for him.

After all, those flowers were a big thing in his life. He'd raised them from special seed and he'd babied them along, and for anybody who is crazy about flowers, I imagine they were tops.

"Someone might have used some spray on them," I said. "Almost any kind of spray, if you don't dilute it enough, would kill them."

Out in the garden, I took a close look at the dead flowers, but nowhere could I see any sign of the burning from too strong a spray.

Then I saw the holes, at first only two or three of them, then, as I went on looking, dozens of them. They were all over the garden, about an inch in diameter, for all the world as if someone had taken a broomstick and punched holes all over the place. I got down on my knees and could see that they tapered, the way they do when you pull weeds with big taproots out of the ground.

"You been pulling weeds?" I asked.

"Not big ones like that," said the banker. "I take good care of those flowers, Joe. You know that. Keep them weeded and watered and cultivated and sprayed. Put just the right amount of commercial fertilizer in the soil. Try to keep it at top fertility."

"You should use manure. It's better than all the commercial fertilizer you can buy."

"I don't agree with you. Tests have proved …"

It was an old argument, one that we fought out each year. I let him run on, only half listening to him, while I picked up some of the soil and crumbled it. it was dead soil. You could feel that it was. It crumbled at the lightest touch and was dry, even when I dug a foot beneath the surface.

"You water this bed recently?" I asked.

"Last evening," Stevens said.

"When did you find the flowers like this?"

"This morning. They looked fine last night. And now—" he blinked fast.

I asked him for a fruit jar and filled it with a sample of the soil.

"I'll send this in and see if there's anything wrong with it," I said.

A bunch of dogs were barking at something in the hedge in front of my place when I got home. Some of the dogs in the neighborhood are hell on cats. I parked the car and picked up an old hoe handle and went out to rescue the cat they seemed to have cornered.

They scattered when they saw me coming and I started to look in the hedge for the cat. There wasn't any and that aroused my curiosity and I wondered what the dogs could have been barking at. So I went hunting.

And I found it.

It was lying on the ground, close against the lower growth of the hedge, as if it had crawled there for protection.

I reached in and pulled it out—a weed of some sort, about five feet tall, and with a funny root system. There were eight roots, each about an inch in diameter at the top and tapering to a quarter inch or so. They weren't all twisted up, but were sort of sprung out, so that there were four to the side, each set of four in line. I looked at their tips and I saw that the roots were not broken off, but ended in blunt, strong points.

The stalk, at the bottom, was about as thick as a man's fist. There were four main branches covered with thick, substantial, rather meaty leaves; but the last foot of the branches was bare of leaves. At the top were several flower or seed pouches, the biggest of them the size of an old-fashioned coffee mug.

I squatted there looking at it. The more I looked, the more puzzled I became. As a county agent, you have to know quite a bit about botany and this plant was like none I had seen before.

I dragged it across the lawn to the toolshed back of the garage and tossed it in there, figuring that after supper I'd have a closer look at it.

I went in the house to get my evening meal ready and decided to broil a steak and fix up a bowl of salad.

A lot of people in town wonder at my living in the old homestead, but I'm used to the house and there seemed to be no sense in moving somewhere else when all it costs me is taxes and a little upkeep. For several years before Mother died, she had been quite feeble and I did all the cleaning and helped with the cooking, so I'm fairly handy at it.

After I washed the dishes, I read what little there was to read in the evening paper and then looked up an old text on botany, to see if I could find anything that might help identify the plant.

I didn't find anything and, just before I went to bed, I got a flashlight and went out, imagining, I suppose, that I'd find the weed somehow different than I remembered it.

I opened the door of the shed and flashed the light where I'd tossed the weed on the floor. At first, I couldn't see it, then I heard a leafy rustling over in one corner and I turned the light in that direction.

The weed had crawled over to one corner and it was trying to get up, its stem bowed out—the way a man would arch his back—pressing against the wall of the shed.

Standing there with my mouth open, watching it try to raise itself erect, I felt horror and fear. I reached out to the corner nearest the door and snatched up an axe.

If the plant has succeeded in getting up, I might have chopped it to bits. But, as I stood there, I saw the thing would never make it. I was not surprised when it slumped back on the floor.

What I did next was just as unreasoning and instinctive as reaching for the axe.

I found an old washtub and half filled it with water. Then I picked up the plant—it had a squirmish feel to it, like a worm—stuck its roots into the water, and pushed the tub back against the wall, so the thing could be braced upright.

I went into the house and ransacked a couple of closets until I

found the sunlamp I'd bought a couple of years back, to use when I had a touch of arthritis in my shoulder. I rigged up the lamp and trained it on the plant, not too close. Then I got a big shovelful of dirt and dumped it in the tub.

And that, I figured, was about all I could do. I was giving the plant water, soil-food and simulated sunlight. I was afraid that, if I tried a more fancy treatment, I might kill it, for I hadn't any notion of what conditions it might be used to.

Apparently I handled it right. It perked up considerably and, as I moved about, the coffee-cup-sized pod on the top kept turning, following every move I made.

I watched it for a while and moved the sunlamp back a little, so there'd be no chance of scorching it, and went back into the house.

It was then that I really began to get bone-scared. I had been frightened out in the shed, of course, but that had been shock. Now, thinking it over, I began to understand more clearly what sort of creature I'd found underneath the hedge. I remember I wasn't yet ready to say it out loud, but it seemed probable that my guest was an alien intelligence.

I did some wondering about how it had gotten here and if it had made the holes in Banker Stevens' flowerbed and also if it could have had anything to do with the big hole out in Pete Skinner's north forty.

I sat around, arguing with myself, for a man just does not go prowling around in his neighbor's garden after midnight.

But I had to know.

I walked up the alley to the back of the Stevens house and sneaked into the garden. Shielding the flashlight with my hat, I had another look at the holes in the ruined flowerbed. I wasn't too surprised when I saw that they occurred in series of eight, four to the side—exactly the kind of holes the plant back in my tool-shed would make if it sank its roots into the ground.

I counted at least eleven of those eight-in-line sets of holes and I'm sure that there were more. But I didn't want to stick around too long, for fear Banker Stevens might wake up and ask questions.

So I went back home, down the alley, and was just in time to catch that garbage-stealing dog doing a good job on the can. He had his head stuck clear down into it and I was able to sneak up behind him. He heard me and struggled to get out, but he'd jammed himself into the can. Before he could get loose, I landed a good swift kick where it did maximum good. He set some kind of canine speed record in getting off the premises, I imagine.

I went to the toolshed and opened the door. The tub half full of muddy water was still there and the sunlamp was still burning—but the plant was gone. I looked all over the shed and couldn't find it. So I

unplugged the sunlamp and headed for the house.

To be truthful, I was a little relieved that the plant had wandered off.

But when I rounded the corner of the house, I saw it hadn't. It was in the window box, and the geraniums I had nursed all spring were hanging limply over the side of the box.

I stood there and looked at it and had the feeling that it was looking back at me.

And I remembered that not only had it had to travel from the toolshed to the house and then climb into the window box, but it had had to open the toolshed door and close it again.

It was standing up, stiff and straight, and appeared to be in the best of health. It looked thoroughly incongruous in the window box—as if a man had grown a tall stalk of corn there, although it didn't look anything like a stalk of corn.

I got a pail of water and poured it into the window box. Then I felt something tapping me on the head and looked up. The plant had bent over and was patting me with one of its branches. The modified leaf at the end of the branch has spread itself out to do the patting and looked something like a hand.

I went into the house and up to bed and the main thing I was thinking about was that, if the plant got too troublesome or dangerous, all I had to do was mix a strong dose of commercial fertilizer or arsenic, or something just as deadly, and water it with the mixture.

Believe it or not, I went to sleep.

Next morning I got to thinking that maybe I should repair the old greenhouse and put my guest in there and be sure to keep the door locked. It seemed to be reasonably friendly and inoffensive, but I couldn't be sure, of course.

After breakfast I went out into the yard to look for it, with the idea of locking it in the garage for the day, but it wasn't in the window box, or anywhere that I could see. And since it was Saturday, when a lot of farmers came to town, with some of them sure to be dropping in to see me, I didn't want to be late for work.

I was fairly busy during the day and didn't have much time for thinking or worrying. But when I was wrapping up the sample of soil from the banker's garden to send to the Soils Bureau, I wondered if maybe there wasn't someone at the university I should notify. I also wondered about letting someone in Washington know, except I didn't have the least idea whom to contact, or even which department.

Coming home that evening, I found the plant anchored in the garden, in a little space where the radishes and lettuce had been. The few lettuce plants still left in the ground were looking sort of limp, but

everything else was all right. I took a good look at the plant. It waved a couple of its branches at me—and it wasn't the wind blowing them, for there wasn't any wind—and it nodded its coffee-cup pod as if to let me know it recognized me. But that was all it did.

After supper, I scouted the hedge in front of the house and found two more of the plants. Both of them were dead.

My next-door neighbors had gone to a movie, so I scouted their place, too, and found four more of the plants, under bushes and in corners where they had crawled away to die.

I wondered whether it might not have been the plant I'd rescued that the dogs had been barking at the night before. I felt fairly sure it was. A dog might be able to recognize an alien being where a man would be unable to.

I counted up. At least seven of the things had picked out Banker Stevens' flowerbed for a meal and the chemical fertilizer he used had killed all but one of them. The sole survivor, then, was out in the garden, killing off my lettuce.

I wondered why the lettuce and geraniums and Stevens' flowers had reacted as they did. It might be that the alien plants produced some sort of poison, which they injected into the soil to discourage other plant life from crowding their feeding grounds. That was not exactly far-fetched. There are trees and plants on Earth that accomplish the same thing by various methods. Or it might be that the aliens sucked the soil so dry of moisture and plant-food that the other plants simply starved to death.

I did some wondering on why they'd come to Earth at all and why some of them had stayed. If they had travelled from some other planet, they must have come in a ship, so that hole out in Pete's north forty might have been where they stopped to replenish their food supply, dumping the equivalent of garbage beside the hole.

And what about the seven I had counted?

Could they have jumped ship? Or gone on shore leave and run into trouble, the way human sailors often do?

Maybe the ship had searched for the missing members of the party, had been unable to find them, and had gone on. If that were so, then my own plant was a marooned alien. Or maybe the ship was still hunting.

I wore myself out, thinking about it, and went to bed early, but lay there tossing for a long time. Then, just as I was falling asleep, I heard the dog at the garbage can. You'd think after what had happened to him the night before, that he'd have decided to skip that particular can, but not him. He was rattling and banging it around, trying to tip it over.

I picked a skillet off the stove and opened the back door. I got a

good shot at him, but missed him by a good ten feet. I was so sore that I didn't even go out to pick up the skillet, but went back to bed.

It must have been several hours later that I was brought straight up in bed by the terror-stricken yelping of a dog. I jumped out and ran to the window. It was a bright moonlit night and the dog was going down the driveway as if the devil himself were after him. Behind him sailed the plant. It had wrapped one of its branches around his tail and the other three branches were really giving him a working over.

They went up the street out of sight and, for a long time after they disappeared, I could hear the dog still yelping. Within a few minutes, I saw the plant coming up the gravel, walking like a spider on its eight roots.

It turned off the driveway and planted itself beside a lilac bush and seemed to settle down for the night. I decided that if it wasn't good for anything else, the garbage can would be safe, at least. If the dog came back again, the plant would be waiting to put the bee on him.

I lay awake for a long time, wondering how the plant had known I didn't want the dog raiding the garbage. It probably had seen—if that is the proper word—me chase him out of the yard.

I went to sleep with the comfortable feeling that the plant and I had finally begun to understand each other.

The next day was Sunday and I started working on the greenhouse, putting it into shape so I could cage up the plant. It had found itself a sunny spot in the garden and was imitating a large and particularly ugly weed I'd been too lazy to pull out.

My next-door neighbor came over to offer free advice, but he kept shifting uneasily and I knew there was something on his mind.

Finally he came out with it. "Funny thing—Jenny swears she saw a big plant walking around in your yard the other day. The kid saw it, too, and he claims it chased him." He tittered a little, embarrassed. "You know how kids are."

"Sure," I said.

He stood around a while longer and gave me some more advice, then went across the yard and home.

I worried about what he had told me. If the plant really had taken to chasing kids, there'd be hell to pay.

I worked at the greenhouse all day long, but there was a lot to do, for it had been out of use ten years or more, and by nightfall I was tuckered out.

After supper, I went out on the back stoop and sat on the steps, watching the stars. It was quiet and restful.

I hadn't been there more than fifteen minutes when I heard a rustling. I looked around and there was the plant, coming up out of

the garden, walking along on its roots.

It sort of squatted down beside me and the two of us just sat there, looking at the stars. Or, at least, I looked at them. I don't actually know if the plant could see. If it couldn't, it had some other faculty that was just as good as sight. We just sat there.

After a while, the plant moved one of its branches over and took hold of my arm with that handlike leaf. I tensed a bit, but its touch was gentle enough and I sat still, figuring that if the two of us were to get along, we couldn't start out by flinching away from one another.

Then, so gradually that at first I didn't notice it, I began to perceive a sense of gratitude, as if the plant might be thanking me. I looked around to see what it was doing and it wasn't doing a thing, just sitting there as I was, but with its "hand" still on my arm.

Yet in some way, the plant was trying to make me understand that it was grateful to me for saving it.

It formed no words, you understand. Other than rustling its leaves, it couldn't make a sound. But I understood that some system of communication was in operation. No words, but emotion—deep, clear, utterly sincere emotion.

It eventually got a little embarrassing, this non-stop gratitude.

"Oh, that's all right," I said, trying to put an end to it. "You would have done as much for me."

Somehow, the plant must have sensed that its thanks had been accepted, because the gratitude wore off a bit and something else took over—a sense of peace and quiet.

The plant got up and started to walk off and I called out to it, "Hey, Plant, wait a minute!"

It seemed to understand that I had called it back, for it turned around. I took it by a branch and started to lead it around the boundaries of the yard. If this communication business was going to be any good, you see, it had to go beyond the sense of gratitude and peace and quiet. So I led the plant all the way around the yard and I kept thinking at it as hard as I could, telling it not to go beyond that perimeter.

By the time I'd finished, I was wringing wet with effort. But, finally, the plant seemed to be trying to say okay. Then I built up a mental image of it chasing a kid and I shook a mental finger at it. The plant agreed. I tried to tell it not to move around the yard in daylight, when people would be able to see it. Whether the concept was harder or I was getting tired, I don't know, but both the plant and I were limp when it at last indicated that it understood.

Lying in bed that night, I thought a lot about this problem of communication. It was not telepathy, apparently, but something based on mental pictures and emotions.

But I saw it as my one chance. If I could learn to converse, no matter how, and the plant could learn to communicate something beyond abstracts to me, it could talk to people, would be acceptable and believable, and the authorities might be willing to recognize it as an intelligent being. I decided that the best thing to do would be to acquaint it with the way we humans lived and try to make it understand why we lived that way. And since I couldn't take my visitor outside the yard, I'd have to do it inside.

I went to sleep, chuckling at the idea of my house and yard being a classroom for an alien.

The next day I received a phone call from the Soils Bureau at the university.

"What kind of stuff is this you're sending us?" the man demanded.

"Just some soil I picked up," I said. "What's wrong with it?"

"Sample One is all right. It's just common, everyday Burton County soil. But Sample Two, that sand—good God, man, it has gold dust and flakes of silver and some copper in it! All of it in minute particles, of course. But if some farmer out your way has a pit of that stuff, he's rich."

"At the most, he has twenty-five or thirty truckloads of it."

"Where'd he get it? Where'd it come from?"

I took a deep breath and told him all I knew about the incident out at Pete's north forty.

He said he'd be right out, but I caught him before he hung up and asked him about the third sample.

"What was he growing on that ground?" the man asked baffledly. "Nothing I know of could suck it that clean, right down to the bare bone! Tell him to put in a lot of organic material and some lime and almost everything else that's needed in good soil, before he tries to use it."

The Soils people came out to Pete's place and they brought along some other men from the university. A little later in the week, after the papers had spelled out big headlines, a couple of men from Washington showed up. But no one seemed able to figure it out and they finally gave up. The newspapers gave it a play and dropped it as soon as the experts did.

During that time, curiosity seekers flocked to the farm to gape at the hole and the pile of sand. They had carried off more than half the sand and Pete was madder than hell about the whole business.

"I'm going to fill in that hole and forget all about it," he told me, and that was what he did.

Meanwhile, at home, the situation was progressing. Plant seemed to understand what I had told him about not moving out of the yard and acting like a weed during the daytime and leaving kids alone.

Everything was peaceable and I got no more complaints. Best of all, the garbage-stealing dog never showed his snout again.

Several times, during all the excitement out at Pete's place, I had been tempted to tell someone from the university about Plant. In each case, I decided not to, for we weren't getting along too well in the talk department.

But in other ways we were doing just fine.

I let Plant watch me while I took an electric motor apart and then put it together again, but I wasn't too sure he knew what it was all about. I tried to show him the concept of mechanical power and I demonstrated how the motor would deliver that power and I tried to tell him what electricity was. But I got all bogged down with that, not knowing too much about it myself. I don't honestly think Plant got a thing out of that electric motor.

With the motor of the car, though, we were more successful. We spent one whole Sunday dismantling it and then putting it back together. Watching what I was doing, Plant seemed to take a lot of interest in it.

We had to keep the garage door locked and it was a scorcher of a day and, anyhow, I'd much rather spend a Sunday fishing than tearing down a motor. I wondered a dozen times if it was worth it, if there might not be easier ways to teach Plant the facts of our Earth culture.

I was all tired out and failed to hear the alarm and woke up an hour later than I should. I jumped into my clothes, ran out to the garage, unlocked the door and there was Plant. He had parts from that motor strewn all over the floor and he was working away at it, happy as a clam. I almost took an axe to him, but I got hold of myself in time. I locked the door behind me and walked to work.

All day, I wondered how Plant had gotten into the garage. Had he sneaked back in the night before, when I wasn't looking, or had he been able to pick the lock? I wondered, too, what sort of shape I'd find the car in when I got home. I could just see myself working half the night, putting it back together.

I left work a little early. If I had to work on the car, I wanted an early start.

When I got home, the motor was all assembled and Plant was out in the garden, acting like a weed. Seeing him there, I realized he knew how to unlock the door, for I'd locked it when I left that morning.

I turned on the ignition, making bets with myself that it wouldn't start. But it did. I rode around town a little to check it and there wasn't a thing wrong with it.

For the next lesson, I tried something simpler. I got my carpentry tools and showed them to Plant and let him watch me while I made a bird house. Not that I needed any more bird houses. The place already

crawled with them. But it was the easiest, quickest thing I could think of to show Plant how we worked in wood.

He watched closely and seemed to understand what was going on, all right, but I detected a sadness in him. I put my hand on his arm to ask him what was the matter.

All that I got was a mournful reaction.

It bewildered me. Why should Plant take so much interest in monkeying around with a motor and then grieve at the making of a bird house? I didn't get it figured out until a few days later, when Plant saw me picking a bouquet of flowers for the kitchen table.

And then it hit me.

Plant was a plant and flowers were plants and so was lumber, or at least lumber at one time had been a plant. And I stood there, with the bouquet dangling in my hand and Plant looking at me, and I thought of all the shocks he had in store when he found out more about us—how we slaughtered our forests, grew plants for food and clothing, squeezed or boiled drugs from them.

It was just like a human going to another planet, I realized, and finding that some alien life form grew humans for food.

Plant didn't seem to be sore at me nor did he shrink from me in horror. He was just sad. When he got sad, he was the saddest-looking thing you could possibly imagine. A bloodhound with a hangover would have looked positively joyous in comparison.

If we ever had gotten to the point where we could have really talked—about things like ethics and philosophy, I mean—I might have learned just how Plant felt about our plant-utilizing culture. I'm sure he tried to tell me, but I couldn't understand much of what he was driving at.

We were sitting out on the steps one night, looking at the stars. Earlier, Plant had been showing me his home planet, or it may have been some of the planets he had visited. I don't know. All I could get were fuzzy mental pictures and reactions. One place was hot and red, another blue and cold. There was another that had all the colors of the rainbow and a cool, restful feel about it, as if there might have been gentle winds and fountains and birdsongs in the twilight.

We had been sitting there for quite a while when he put his hand back on my arm again and he showed me a plant. He must have put considerable effort into getting me to visualize it, for the image was sharp and clear. It was a scraggy, rundown plant and it looked even sadder than Plant looked when he got sad, if that is possible. When I started feeling sorry for it, he began to think of kindness and, when he thought of things like kindness and sadness and gratitude and happiness, he could really pour it on.

He had me thinking such big, kindly thoughts, I was afraid that I

would burst. While I sat there, thinking that way, I saw the plant begin to perk up. It grew and flowered and was the most beautiful thing I had ever seen. It matured its seeds and dropped them. Swiftly, little plants sprang from the seeds and they were healthy and full of ginger, too.

I mulled that one over several days, suspecting I was crazy for even thinking what I did. I tried to shrug it off, but it wouldn't shrug. It gave me an idea.

The only way I could get rid of it was to try it out.

Out in back of the toolshed was the sorriest yellow rose in town. Why it clung to life, year after year, I could never figure out. It had been there ever since I was a boy. The only reason it hadn't been dug up and thrown away long ago was that no one had ever needed the ground it was rooted in.

I thought, if a plant ever needed help, that yellow rose was it.

So I sneaked out back of the toolshed, making sure that Plant didn't see me, and stood in front of that yellow rose. I began to think kindly thoughts about it, although God knows it was hard to think kindly toward such a wretched thing. I felt foolish and hoped none of the neighbors spotted me, but I kept at it. I didn't seem to accomplish much to start with, but I went back, time after time. In a week or so, I got so that I just naturally loved that yellow rose to pieces.

After four or five days, I began to see some change in it. At the end of two weeks, it had developed from a scraggy, no-account bush to one that any rose fancier would have been proud to own. It dropped its bug-chewed leaves and grew new ones that were so shiny, they looked as if they were waxed. Then it grew big flower buds and, in no time at all, was a blaze of yellow glory.

But I didn't quite believe it. In the back of my mind, I figured that Plant must have seen me doing it and helped along a bit. So I decided to test the process again where he couldn't interfere.

Millie had been trying for a couple of years to grow an African violet in a flower pot at the office. By this time, even she was willing to admit it was a losing battle. I had made a lot of jokes about the violet and, at times, Millie had been sore at me about it. Like the yellow rose, it was a hard-luck plant. The bugs ate it. Millie forgot to water it. It got knocked onto the floor. Visitors used it for an ashtray.

Naturally, I couldn't give it the close, intensive treatment I'd given the rose, but I made a point to stop for a few minutes every day beside the violet and think good thoughts about it and, in a couple of weeks, it perked up considerably. By the end of the month, it had bloomed for the first time in its life.

Meanwhile, Plant's education continued.

At first, he'd balked at entering the house, but finally trusted me

enough to go in. He didn't spend much time there, for the house was too full of reminders that ours was a plant-utilizing culture. Furniture, clothing, cereal, paper—even the house itself—were all made of vegetation. I got an old butter tub and filled it with soil and put it in one corner of the dining room, so he could eat in the house if he wanted to, but I don't remember that he even once took a snack out of that tub.

Although I didn't admit it then, I knew that what Plant and I had tried to do had been a failure. Whether someone else might have done better, I don't know. I suspect he might have. But I didn't know how to go about getting in touch and I was afraid of being laughed at. It's a terrible thing, our human fear of ridicule.

And there was Plant to consider, too. How would he take being passed on to someone else? I'd screw up my courage to do something about it, and then Plant would come up out of the garden and sit beside me on the steps, and we'd talk—not about anything that mattered, really, but about happiness and sadness and brotherhood, and my courage would go glimmering and I'd have to start all over again.

I've since thought how much like two lost children we must have been, strange kids raised in different countries, who would have liked to play together, except neither knew the rules for the other's games or spoke the other's language.

I know … I know. According to common sense, you begin with mathematics. You show the alien that you know two and two are four. Then you draw the Solar System and show him the Sun on the diagram and then point to the Sun overhead and you point to Earth on the diagram, then point to yourself. In this way, you demonstrate to him that you know about the Solar System and about space and the stars and so on.

Then you hand him the paper and the pencil.

But what if he doesn't know mathematics? What if the two-plus-two-makes-four routine doesn't mean a thing to him? What if he's never seen a drawing? What if he can't draw—or see or hear or feel or think the way you do?

To deal with an alien, you've got to get down to basics.

And maybe math isn't basic.

Maybe diagrams aren't.

In that case, you have to search for something that is.

Yet there must be certain universal basics.

I think I know what they are.

That, if nothing else, Plant taught me.

Happiness is basic. And sadness is basic. And gratitude, in perhaps a lesser sense. Kindness, too. And perhaps hatred—although

Plant and I never dealt in that.

Maybe brotherhood. For the sake of humanity, I hope so.

But kindness and happiness and brotherhood are awkward tools to use in reaching specific understanding, although in Plant's world they may not be.

It was getting on toward autumn and I was beginning to wonder how I'd take care of Plant during the winter months.

I could have kept him in the house, but he hated it there.

Then, one night, we were sitting on the back steps, listening to the first crickets of the season.

The ship came down without a sound. I didn't see it until it was about at treetop level. It floated down and landed between the house and toolshed.

I was startled for a moment, but not frightened, and perhaps not too surprised. In the back of my head, I'd wondered all the time, without actually knowing it, whether Plant's pals might not ultimately find him.

The ship was a shimmery sort of thing, as if it might not have been made of metal and was not really solid. I noticed that it had not really landed, but floated a foot or so above the grass.

Three other Plants stepped out and the oddest part of it was that there wasn't any door. They just came out of the ship and the ship closed behind them.

Plant took me by the arm and twitched it just a little, to make me understand he wanted me to walk with him to the ship. He made little comforting thoughts to try to calm me down.

And all the time that this was going on, I could sense the talk between Plant and those other three—but just grasping the fringe of the conversation, barely knowing there was talk, not aware of what was being said.

And then, while Plant stood beside me, with his hand still on my arm, those other plants walked up. One by one, each took me by the other arm and stood facing me for a moment and told me thanks and happiness.

Plant told me the same, for the last time, and then the four of them walked toward the ship and disappeared into it. The ship left me standing there, watching it rise into the night, until I couldn't see it any longer.

I stood there for a long time, staring up into the sky, with the thanks and happiness fading and loneliness beginning to creep in.

I knew that, somewhere up there, was a larger ship, that in it were many other Plants, that one of them had lived with me for almost six months and that others of them had died in the hedges and fence corners of the neighborhood. I knew also that it had been the

big ship that had scooped out the load of nutritious soil from Pete Skinner's field.

Finally, I stopped looking at the sky. Over behind the toolshed I saw the whiteness of the yellow rose in bloom and once again I thought about the basics.

I wondered if happiness and kindness, perhaps even emotions that we humans do not know, might not be used on Plant's world as we use the sciences.

For the rose bush had bloomed when I thought kindly thoughts of it. And the African violet had found a new life in the kindness of a human.

Startling as it may seem, foolish as it may sound, it is not an unknown phenomenon. There are people who have the knack of getting the most out of a flowerbed or a garden. And it is said of these people that they have green thumbs.

May it not be that *green thumbness* is not so much concerned with skill or how much care is taken of a plant, as with the kindliness and the interest of the person tending it?

For eons, the plant life of this planet has been taken for granted. It is simply there. By and large, plants are given little affection. They are planted or sown. They grow. In proper season, they are harvested.

I sometimes wonder if, as hunger tightens its grip upon our teeming planet, there may not be a vital need for the secret of *green thumbness*.

If kindness and sympathy can cause a plant to produce beyond its normal wont, then shouldn't we consider kindness as a tool to ward off Earth's hunger? How much more might be produced if the farmer loved his wheat?

It's silly, of course, a principle that could not gain acceptance.

And undoubtedly it would not work—not in a plant-utilizing culture.

For how could you keep on convincing a plant that you feel kindly toward it when, season after season, you prove that your only interest in it is to eat it or make it into clothing or chop it down for lumber?

I walked out back of the shed and stood beside the yellow rose, trying to find the answer. The yellow rose stirred, like a pretty woman who knows she's being admired, but no emotion came from it.

The thanks and happiness were gone. There was nothing left but the loneliness.

Damned vegetable aliens—upsetting a man so he couldn't eat his breakfast cereal in peace!

When It's Hangnoose Time in Hell

As with most of Clifford D. Simak's Western stories, the title under which this story was originally published was not the one that was on it when it was submitted to the magazine; but when I say that, I cannot tell you what the author's title for this story was. The titles of most of his Westerns were changed after they left his hands, and most of them were written within a period of a few years; thus, although I've been trying, I haven't had much luck matching what little I know about those stories' dates of mailing with the publication dates of many of the stories.

This story first appeared in the April 1946 issue of .44 Western Magazine*, but although I can tell you that Cliff was paid sixty dollars in 1943 for a story entitled "Sixgun Gamble," and was paid one hundred and sixty in 1946 for a story entitled "Walk in the Middle of the Street," I also have to tell you that he sold at least ten other Westerns during the period between those two stories—and no copy of any of those manuscripts is known to exist.*

Nonetheless, I can tell you that, true to his preferences, Cliff made this story rather unconventional: Its protagonist is a riverboat gambler who was far from the Mississippi, and he is honest.

He is also blunt: "Shoot or wade," Culver says.

—dww

CHAPTER ONE
Death Pays for an Insult

Grant Culver was walking along, minding his own business and thinking of Nancy Atwood, when the man bumped into him and sent him staggering off the sidewalk into mud that was Gun Gulch's main street.

Culver lit flat on his back. His hat flew off and was ground beneath the wheels of a passing wagon. His carpetbag slipped out of his hand and splashed into a waterhole a good six feet away. On the porch of the Crystal Bar a crowd of loafers laughed uproariously, bent over, slapping one another on the back.

Culver sat up, the cold ooze seeping through his clothing, and eyed the laughing crowd. Sort of an initiation, he figured. A joke they played on tenderfeet.

He rose to his feet and singled out the man who had pushed him, a bear of a man who was roaring with laughter.

Culver waded to the boardwalk, mud and water dripping from his clothes. He gained the walk and stood wiping his hands on the front of his coat. The laughter quieted and the man who had bumped him turned around and faced him. Culver studied him, saw the sneer on his face.

"I presume," Culver said, "that it was an accident."

The man took his time in answering, his little pig-eyes small and red and watchful.

"Hell, no," he said. "I done it on purpose."

Deliberately, Culver wiped the back of his right hand against his coat and as the hand traveled down the fabric it became a fist, a fist that struck with savage, blistering speed.

It came so fast the man didn't even duck. It smacked against his chin with a hollow, thudding sound to lift him from his feet and slam him back. He landed in the mud with a splash that sent yellow water geysering high into the air.

Culver snapped a quick look over his shoulder at the jaspers on the porch, but they had not moved. They stood like frozen men, waiting for the earth to open underneath their feet.

Out in the street Culver's antagonist had lumbered upright, was heaving himself back onto the boardwalk. He stood there, shaking his hands to rid them of the clinging mud and on the porch back of Culver the silence was deep.

"You win, mister," Culver told the muddy man. "You made a bigger splash than I did."

The man lumbered forward a step or two, pig-eyes glaring from above the bushy beard. Then his arm was moving, coming up and crooking, pistoning down for the gun butt at his side.

Culver's fingers snapped around his six-gun's grip and spun it free of leather. His wrist jerked to the impact of the recoil.

Out on the sidewalk the bear-like man straightened out of his gunning crouch, straightened until it seemed that he was standing on his tiptoes, while a tiny stream of red came out of his forehead.

He tottered, the gun dropped from his fingers, then he fell, like a tree would fall, stiff and straight. His head and shoulders splashed into the mud, but his boots stayed on the sidewalk.

Culver turned to face the porch. Slowly he lifted his six and blew across the muzzle to clear away the smoke.

"Perhaps," he suggested softly, "one of you gentlemen wouldn't mind stepping out into the street to get my carpetbag."

They stood still and silent, watching him with steady cold eyes, but he noticed that their hands were very careful not to move toward their belts.

Culver sighed. "I should hate to insist," he told them.

One of them moved out of the crowd and started down the stairs, hobbling on the wooden peg that served him for a right leg. The peg tapped loudly in the silence as the man inched slowly down the steps.

"Wait a second," Culver said sharply. "You aren't the one to do it. You didn't laugh half loud enough when I was lying out there."

He singled out a man with his six-gun barrel. "Now, that gent there," he told the crowd, "was fair beside himself. I never saw a man get so much entertainment out of such a simple thing. …"

"If you think I'm going out to get your bag," the man roared at him, "you're loco."

Culver shrugged one shoulder. "I suppose you have a gun," he said.

He saw the man's face go white and drawn.

He blustered. "If you think. …"

"Shoot or wade," Culver told him, almost indifferently.

Another man spoke quietly, sharply. "For God's sake, Perkins, go and get it. You wouldn't have a chance."

Perkins looked around, searching the faces that ringed him in.

His shoulders drooped. "All right," he said.

He came slowly down the steps, crossed the sidewalk, stepped gingerly out into the mud. The mud was to his knees when he reached the bag, tugged it out of the grip of the clinging gumbo and brought it back. Carefully he set it on the sidewalk, climbed the stairs again.

Culver searched the faces on the porch.

"Satisfied?" he asked.

One or two heads nodded.

"Just want to be sure no one feels he's been slighted," Culver told them.

No one seemed to be. He holstered the six-gun, picked up the carpetbag.

"One thing you fellows have to remember," he told them. "It's damn bad manners to push strangers into mud-holes."

He turned and headed down the sidewalk, but behind him came a tapping and a hailing voice. "Just a minute, mister."

He swung around and saw the peg-legged gent hurrying after him. "What can I do for you?" he asked.

Peg-leg fished a notebook from his pocket, flipped the pages, took a pencil stub from behind his ear and wet it on his tongue.

"I wonder if I could have your name," he said.

Culver started at the question. "Why, I suppose you can. Culver. Grant Culver."

The man wrote with cramped and laboring fingers.

"From where?" he asked.

"From the Mississippi," Culver told him. "Sometimes the Missouri."

"The jasper you smoked out," said Peg-leg, "was Stover. He had a big time pushing people in the mud. Thought it was a joke."

He closed the notebook and put it in his pocket, stuck the pencil stub behind his ear. "Thank you very much," he said and started to turn away.

"Say, wait a second," Culver told him. "What's all this about?"

"Vital statistics," Peg-leg said.

"You mean you get the names of everyone who comes to town."

"Most of them," Peg-leg said. "Once in a while I miss a few."

"Have you got a Nancy and Robert Atwood? They should have come in yesterday."

Peg-leg got out his notebook, thumbed it through. "Yep, here they are. Got in yesterday. Staying at the Antlers Hotel just down the street. Gal's a looker. Brother's an engineer and damn poor poker player."

He snapped the book shut, put it in his pocket. "That will be a buck," he said.

"A what?"

"A buck. A dollar. A cartwheel. For information. I don't give out information free of charge."

Culver gasped. "Oh, I see," he said. He took a dollar from his pocket, handed it to the man. He took it, touched his ragged hat by way of thanks.

"Anytime you want to know something just come to me," he said.

“If I don’t know, I’ll find out.”

“I wonder—” Culver began.

“Yes. What is it? Want to know something else?” Peg-leg’s hand was dipping in his pocket for the book.

Culver shook his head. “Nope. Just skip it. Some other time, perhaps.”

“Okay,” Peg-leg said cheerfully. He turned around and hobbled down the street.

Culver stared after him, scrubbing his chin thoughtfully with his hand. Then he picked up his bag and headed down the street toward the Antlers Hotel.

Gun Gulch was a seething brew of humanity turned mad by the gold-germ running in its veins. Its one main street was churned to a strip of paste-like, sucking mud by chugging wagon wheels, by the pounding, straining hoofs of horses bringing in the freight that built the false-front stores and stocked them with the needs of the frontier brood.

Back in Antelope town, Culver had been told in way of warning:

“Gun Gulch is a tough town. You walk in the middle of the street and you mind your business.”

And that, he thought, standing at the window of his room, was right. Walk in the middle of the street, unless you got pushed off. Deliberately, by a man with a black beard and pig-eyes that watched every move you made.

The name of the place had been the Crystal Bar. That would be Hamilton’s place. Hamilton might have heard of Farson, might be able to tell him something of him. Certainly, if Farson passed through Gun Gulch, Hamilton would have known it.

Culver frowned, thinking back on his past associations with Hamilton. A man that made a little shiver run up your shoulder-blades. A man whose handshake was like grabbing a flabby fish that was sweating just a little. And the worst of it was that if Hamilton had no word of Farson, he would have to ask the man for a job. That dollar he had given Peg-leg had been almost his last.

Maybe Peg-leg had Farson in his notebook. He had almost asked him and then had decided against it. Hamilton would keep his mouth shut and Peg-leg probably wouldn’t. Culver grinned, remembering the little man tapping along on his wooden peg.

The first lamps of evening were blooming out of the windows along the street, throwing splashes of orange and yellow light across the crowded sidewalks and out into the muddy road. A wagon went past, piled high with freight. From where he stood, Culver could hear the high, shrill profanity of the teamster above the babble of the street.

Letting himself out the door, he headed for the stairs, had almost reached them when a voice called from the hall behind him. He swung around and saw Nancy Atwood, standing in front of an open door almost opposite his own.

"Grant Culver," she said, "will you come and say hello to me."

He walked toward her, smiling. "I was wondering when I'd see you. A man with a wooden leg told me you had put up here."

"I do declare," she told him, "after you'd traveled all the way with us I'd thought you could have kept on until we got to Gun Gulch."

He shook his head. "I had to stop at Antelope to ask about a man."

"A friend of yours?" Nancy asked.

"I don't rightly know. He used to be."

Pretty, he thought, looking at her. Pretty as a picture with her raven hair piled atop her head. She was wearing a flame-colored dress that left her shoulders bare.

"You're going out, Grant?" she asked.

"I thought I would. If—"

She silenced him with a gesture of her hand. "You might watch for Bob," she said then. "I'm just a little—well, a little bit afraid."

He laughed at her easily. "Gun Gulch may be tough, Nancy, but not as bad as that. Your brother can take care of himself."

Her voice choked a little. "He's been gambling," she said. "He denies it, but I know he has. And he's so poor at it and we have so little money."

"And you want me to break up the game?"

"Well, not exactly that. You might see what you can do to get him out of it as tactfully as possible."

He frowned. "Your brother has a job here?"

She nodded. "Yes, he has. But the man he has to see is out at some diggings somewhere and Bob has to wait until he comes back to town."

"I'll see if I can spot him," he told her.

She smiled at him. "Thanks, Grant," she said. "Good night."

He watched until she shut the door, then moved on down the hall and out onto the street of Gun Gulch.

CHAPTER TWO
The Man Named Hamilton

The Crystal Bar was a smoke-blurred din, a place of lights and music, talk and tinkle, with the undertone of feet shuffling on sawdust. For a moment, Culver stood in the door, staring out over the milling crowd that filled the place. The lights blazed from the ceiling, their brilliance softened by the trails of cigar smoke that snaked up in bluish ribbons. Glassware flashed and scintillated on the back bar and the barkeepers moved about almost like dancing men.

Culver moved down the room, going slowly, shouldering his way through the press of humanity. Foot by foot he worked his way toward the bar.

A bartender growled at him: "What's yours?"

"Nothing right now," Culver told him. "Where can I find Hamilton?"

"What the hell!" The barkeep stopped in mid-sentence, stared at him. His manner changed and he almost fawned.

"The boss said you were to see him just as soon as you come in."

"Thanks," Culver said.

The bartender leaned across the bar. "Have one on the house before you go." He grasped a bottle by the neck, seized a glass.

Culver shook his head.

"Mister," said the barkeep, "you may not know it, but you're the talk of the town."

"How come?" Culver asked.

"Stover was the fastest gunslick this place had ever seen," the barkeep told him.

Culver shook his head. "Slow," he said. "Terrible, awful slow."

He swung around, pushed his way toward the center of the room.

The shot came like a thunderclap that split across the talk, a burst of blasting noise that drowned out all sound and set the ceiling lamps to swaying on their chains.

The crowd surged back and left a cleared space in the center of the room, a place of scuffed-up sawdust and green tables and smoke-filtered light.

Culver stood stock still, staring at the figure on the floor.

Bob Atwood!

Bob Atwood, who had ridden in the stagecoach with him all the way from St. Louis. Nancy Atwood's brother.

Culver lifted his eyes and stared at the man who stood behind the table, a man with his hat tilted on the back of his head, teeth showing

in a firm, white line beneath the jaunty mustache, and with a smoking gun clutched tightly in his hand.

The man was looking at Culver and from where he stood Culver could see the crinkles deepen at the corners of his eyes.

"So," said the man.

Culver felt his muscles tightening, fought to relax them.

The man across the table was Perkins, he who had waded out into the street to get his carpetbag.

The gun was coming up, slowly, surely, and there was no chance to beat it.

"Perkins," Culver said, "you're a lousy shot. You just winged your man."

Perkins' eyes flickered for a moment toward Bob Atwood on the floor and as they did Culver's arm moved swiftly, arm and wrist and fingers a sudden chain of strength and speed that brought the six-gun spinning from its holster.

Perkins' hand jerked nervously and his gun belched smoke and fire. Culver felt the whining bullet spin past his head, heard the crash of glass as it slammed into the back bar mirror.

"You had your shot," Culver told him, bleakly. "Now, by God, it's my turn."

Perkins stood rigid before him, face a deadly white, gun grasped in his hand and tilted toward the ceiling. Slowly, deliberately, Culver's thumb pulled back the hammer and the click of the six-gun's mechanism was a harsh and startling sound. Perkins whimpered. His hand suddenly was shaking and the gun dropped from it.

Without a word, Culver holstered his own gun, turned to the man upon the floor. Atwood was sitting up, hand clutching his shoulder, staring at Culver.

Culver crossed to him. "Can you get up?" he asked.

Atwood nodded. "He dealt from the bottom of the deck," he said. "I caught him at it."

CHAPTER THREE
Wanted—A Spy!

Hamilton reached into the bottom drawer of the battered desk, came up with a box of cigars. “Light up, Culver.”

Chewing the end off the smoke, Culver studied the man. About the same as ever, he decided. A little harder, a bit more vicious, slightly older than he’d been back on the river. But he was the same Calvin Hamilton.

“Sorry about your friend,” Hamilton said. “Hope he will be all right.”

Culver struck a match. “Got him back to the hotel and put him to bed. Got a doctor for him right away.”

Culver ran the match back and forth across the tip of the cigar, eyes taking in the room. An old iron safe behind the desk, a couple of chairs, carpet on the floor, framed sporting prints scattered on the walls.

Hamilton leaned back in the creaking armchair, inserted his thumbs in the armholes of his vest.

“Surprised to see you here,” he said. “River dry up?”

Culver shook his head. “Out looking for a man. Supposed to have come here. Name of Mark Farson. Maybe you heard of him.”

Hamilton rocked slowly in the chair, brow furrowed. “Can’t say I did,” he declared. “But I might have missed him. There are so many people. Someone I should know?”

“Guess you wouldn’t,” Culver told him. “Came after you had left. Got to be pretty friendly with him.”

Culver snapped the match stick in two, flipped it from him with his thumb. “Figured he was about my best friend, I guess. Would have gone through hell barefooted for that kid.”

Back of the desk, Hamilton’s eyes squinted shrewdly. “Loan him some money?”

“Worse than that,” said Culver. “Heard of Gun Gulch, you see. Heard it was a good town. So we pooled our killings and he came out here ahead to sort of look it over. He was to let me know if it was worth investing.”

Culver blew smoke toward the ceiling, vaguely wished he had the money to buy cigars like the fine weed between his fingers.

“Didn’t hear a word of him,” he said. “Not a single word since he left. So I came along to check up. Figured something might have happened to the kid.”

“Run out on you,” Hamilton said, flatly.

Culver looked at him, but the face was a smooth, white mask. “Beginning to think that very thing myself.”

There was a long silence while Culver smoked and Hamilton teetered in the chair.

“Now what?” Hamilton finally asked.

“Nothing, I guess,” said Culver. “No trace of him. Can’t even be sure that he came here. I asked all along the line, but there was nothing doing. Doesn’t prove he didn’t come, of course, but I have no proof that he did.”

“Want to stick around for a few days before you go back,” Hamilton told him, easily. “Interesting town.”

Culver shook his head. “Can’t go back. I’m next door to dead broke.”

He waited but the man across the desk kept silent.

Finally Culver said, “Thought you might have a job for me. I still can handle a deck all right and I know my players.”

Hamilton eyes him closely, cunning in his face. “Figure you could do a trick or two?”

“Not a chance,” Culver told him, curtly. “I always played them straight. No funny business. I won because I was a better player than the other fellow. Stands to reason I would have been. It was my business, but just his way of having fun.”

“Can’t do it that way here,” Hamilton declared. “This is a short shot proposition. Mines may peter out any day. Got to clean up when you can. Got a lot of cash invested. Have to get it back.”

He tilted forward in the chair, took his thumbs out of the armholes of the vest. “How about a loan?” he asked.

Culver shook his head. “I’ll look around a bit.”

“Come to think of it,” said Hamilton, “I might be able to give you a job.”

“Swamping out, maybe,” Culver said, bitterly.

“Nope, a good job. There’s a place across the street, see. Goes by the name of Golden Slipper. Given me a lot of trouble. Hombre by the name of Brown runs it. Barney Brown. Things going on over there I’d like to know about.”

Culver hurled the half smoked cigar into the spittoon angrily. “I’m no spy,” he said, shortly.

“Let’s talk sense.” Hamilton spoke easily. “You’re the only man I can trust. Maybe we don’t like one another, but I can trust you and that’s more than I can say for anyone else around here. All you’ve got to do is go over and see Brown. He will grab you in a minute. Cripes, after you killing one of my men and all, he’ll—”

Culver sat bolt upright in the chair. “One of your men!”

Hamilton laughed at him shortly. “Sure, Stover. I thought you

knew."

"Hell, no," said Culver. "He was just someone that got in my hair. Wouldn't have nothing come of it if he hadn't gone for his gun. Then, naturally, I had to. …"

"Certainly," Hamilton told him. "Certainly. No need to make excuses."

"Perkins one of your men, too, I suppose."

Hamilton nodded.

"Lord, what a mangy lot."

"That's what I've been trying to tell you," said Hamilton. "Hard to get good men. That's why I need you."

Culver rose. "The answer is no, Hamilton. I'm not doing any spying for you or any other man."

Hamilton leaned back again and inserted his thumbs into his vest, rocked gently.

"If I were you, Culver, I'd walk sort of easy. Stover had some friends, you know."

"I suppose that's a threat," said Culver.

"Frankly," Hamilton told him, "that's just exactly what it is."

The street had quieted somewhat, but men still moved along the sidewalks and shrieks of drunken laughter came from the open windows. Across the street was the Golden Slipper and next to it a print shop. GUN GULCH GAZETTE said the uneven sign scrawled across the window in black paint. Behind the window a man perched on a stool at a type cabinet, shoulders bent above his work.

A hand tugged at Culver's sleeve and he turned around. The man with the peg-leg stood beside him.

"Good evening," said Peg-leg. He pulled the notebook from his pocket, took the pencil stub from behind his ear. "Wonder if you would tell me how to spell Atwood's name. Afraid I got it wrong. Don't mind about the other words, but I like to get the names right."

"I thought you had his name once!"

"Did," said Peg-leg. "But I got to put it down again. He got shot, you know."

"You mean you put down all the shootings?"

"Most of them," said Peg-leg, proudly. "Maybe I miss a few of the piddling ones, but I catch the main ones."

Culver grinned. "You should be a newspaper reporter."

Peg-leg scratched his ear. "Am, sort of. Jake, over there at the Gazette, gets lots of his stuff from me. Folks pay me to get things in the paper about them and Jake gives me a drink or buys me a dinner for bringing him the stuff, so it works out all right both ways."

"By the way," asked Culver, "what's your name?"

"It's Harvey," said the man, "but they mostly call me Crip."

He poised the pencil above the notebook. “Now, if you will tell me how to spell Atwood?”

Culver told him, then asked a question: “How do I get across the street? Have to wade?”

The peg-legged man chuckled. “Feller up the street has a plank throwed across the mud. He charges you a buck.”

Across the street and his dollar paid, Culver stood for a moment in front of the Golden Slipper, listening to the sound of revelry that came from behind the door.

“Brown will snap you up,” Hamilton had said.

Culver shrugged. If the worst came to the worst, he would have to do it, but not yet.

He went on past the place, turned in at the printshop door.

The man sitting on the stool looked up as he came in.

“You’re Jake, I suppose?” said Culver.

The man put aside the type stick, slid off the stool and came toward him.

“That’s it, stranger. Jake Palmer is the handle.”

“Mine is Culver.” Culver put out his hand and the man took it in his bony, ink-stained paw.

“You must be the gent that plumb perforated Stover.”

Culver nodded.

“What can I do for you, stranger?” Jake asked. “Any hombre that removes a skunk like Stover is a friend of mine.”

“Thought maybe you could help me,” Culver told him. “I’m looking for a friend by the name of Farson. Mark Farson. Thought maybe you had heard of him.”

Jake put up one hand and scratched his hair-thin head. “Seems as how there was a gent by that name around a while back. But I can’t rightly remember. Didn’t hang around long, seems to me.”

He showed snagged, tobacco-stained teeth in an apologetic grim. “Sorry I can’t be no more help than that.”

“Crip told me about you,” said Culver. “I figured maybe you might know.”

Jake shook his head. “That Crip gets me into more trouble. Goes around claiming he’s collecting news for me. If it wasn’t that he was cracked he’d been buzzard meat long ago. Got enough stuff in that danged notebook of his to convict half the town if it could be proved.”

“He seemed all right to me,” said Culver.

“He ain’t,” insisted Jake. “He’s crazy as a coot and everybody knows it. That’s why they don’t pay attention to him. If they did, he’d be so full of holes he downright wouldn’t hold whiskey.”

“Seems like a lively place,” declared Culver. “Crip probably finds plenty to write down.”

“Mister,” Jake declared, solemnly, “this town ain’t seen nothing yet. Hell is bound to pop one of these days and when it does you’ll walk up to your ankles in blood out there in the street. Hamilton and Brown are getting all squared off. …”

“Hamilton?”

“Bet your boots. Him and Brown, you see, have got the only two big places here. The little ones don’t count. Don’t amount to shucks to them palaces of sin run by Hamilton and Brown. Both of them making money hand over fist and they still ain’t satisfied. Each one of them wants to run the other out. Been importing gunslicks and one of these days there’s going to be a showdown.”

From the back of the shop came a high, shrill voice:

“Pa, you worked long enough. Quit your jawing and close up. Land sakes, you work all the time.”

Jake grinned lop-sidedly. “That’s my wife,” he said. “Guess you better go, mister. Thanks for dropping in.”

It was almost as if a weight had been lifted from Culver. For long miles on the way from St. Louis, he had thought of Farson, had argued with himself, blamed himself for the black suspicion that hovered in his brain. Mark hadn’t run away, he told himself, exultantly. He hadn’t run away.

When Culver got back to where the plank had been the plank and man were gone. Gazing ruefully at the muddy street, he sat down on the step of a harness shop and rolled up both pants legs. If he had to wade that muck out there, there was no sense getting his pants muddy as well as his boots.

From up the street came a tapping sound, a broken, hobbling sound. He listened for a moment, puzzled, then it came to him. It was Crip stumping down the walk. He rose from the step, walked to the edge of the sidewalk and stepped into the mud.

Suddenly the tapping ceased, then began again, faster, hurried, as if the man were running, dodging and ducking as he ran. Boots thumped heavily and there was the sound of scuffling.

A gasping voice cried: “No! No!”

Spinning around, Culver leaped back to the sidewalk, sprinted up the street toward the noise that suddenly was silent. And as he ran his hand snapped back and snatched the sixgun from its holster.

Ahead of him orange flame blossomed in the night and even as it did a howling thing went past him and smashed into the window of a building. Glass crashed and tinkled and the bright orange flame flared again.

Culver brought up his gun, worked the trigger swiftly, ducking sideways as he fired, heading for the pitch-dark mouth of an alleyway between two buildings.

Out ahead of him the six-gun yammered, its blasting reverberating between the buildings, and Culver heard the sodden chunking of the bullets slamming into the clapboards by his side. Then he was in the alleyway, backing on cat-like feet, six-gun ready.

Something caught the back of his ankles and tripped him. He tried to catch himself, but failed, flung back his left hand to break the fall, felt the harshness of coarse fabric underneath his fingers. He hit a yielding, rounded object and rolled to one side, put out an exploring hand, stiffened with horror at the thing he found. It was Crip.

In the darkness, Culver slid his fingers along the dead man's back, found the sticky place that surrounded the horn hilt of a knife. Crouched in the darkness between the two buildings, Culver's mind clicked rapidly.

The peg-legged man had been knifed out there on the street, had crawled into the alleyway before death had overtaken him. Killed by someone who had used a knife for silence, but someone who had been desperate enough to use a gun when he faced detection.

Crazy, Jake had said back there in the printshop, crazy as a coot. Dead long ago if he hadn't been. And now he was dead. Even craziness couldn't hold off death.

Tensed above the body, Culver found the dead man's pocket, slid his hand swiftly into it. His fingers touched the notebook and closed about it, pulled it free.

Then, on his feet again, he was racing down the alleyway, ears strained for the sound of running boots that did not come.

Back in his hotel room, Culver closed and locked the door behind him, stood for a moment listening for the slightest stir to come out of the blackness of the room. But the room was dead. He found the lamp and lighted it, strode to the window and pulled down the blind.

Pulling a chair close to the lamp table, he took the notebook from his pocket, leafed swiftly through the pages. Items caught his eyes and he stopped to read:

> *Black Jack rolled for 100 dolars at Golden Slipper. Jim done it.*
>
> *July 16—Col. Newhouse came to town. Frank Smith found gold. Geo. Johnson lose 80 dolars playing poker with Big Steve.*
>
> *July 17—H. Jackson kiled by Nelson. Old Henry dide.*
>
> *July 18—Stover kiled stranger, got 500 dolar. No one nos this.*

Stover, thought Culver. Stover had been the man out on the walk, the man with the bushy beard and the pig-like eyes. So Stover had robbed a stranger of $500 and no one, said Crip's crabbed scrawl, knew about it. No one but Crip, who had written it down. Crip, who

wasn't so good at other spelling, but liked to get the names right. A gossip book, things that Gun Gulch knew and things it didn't know. Things that a man would know only if he hung around and listened and put two and two together … a man who was a little cracked or he'd been dead long ago.

The book slipped in his fingers and he lost the page. He bent his head and opened it again, searching for a date. May. June. And suddenly, there it was.

June 9—Perkins kiled Farson for money belt. Hamilton had him do it. No one nos this. Buried him at nite.

Culver stiffened in his chair, his hand tightening into a fist that crushed and wrinkled the book in its savage grasp.

June 9—Perkins kiled Farson. …

And now Crip himself was dead. Dead, more than likely because of that very entry in the book. Killed because Hamilton was afraid that it might be there, because he knew that Crip had many things in the book that no other man should know. That especially a man named Culver should not know.

Culver rose from the chair, blew out the light and let himself into the hall.

Downstairs he stopped and tossed the book onto the desk.

"Will you put this in your safe?" he asked.

The clerk picked up the book and stared at it nervously.

"Know it?" asked Culver.

The clerk gulped and nodded.

"Someone killed Crip to get that book," said Culver. "Only I got there first."

"But … but … where are you going, sir?"

"I'm going out to collect a debt," said Culver.

CHAPTER FOUR
When a Hero Fails

Hamilton glanced up swiftly from his desk at the sound of the footstep, froze at the sight of the gun in Culver's hand.

Culver chuckled softly. "How are you, Cal?" he asked.

Hamilton's lips moved drily in his face. "How did you get in?"

"Through the basement window," said Culver. "All the others were locked. The place was dark but I saw the light in your window here."

One of Hamilton's hands slid along the desk top and Culver snapped at him: "Keep those paws where they are. Don't go reaching for a drawer!"

Hamilton slid his hand back again and Culver moved into the room, closed the door behind him. Piles of bills and heaps of silver coin were piled upon the desk top and in front of Hamilton was a heavy ledger.

"Counting up the profits?" asked Culver.

Hamilton didn't answer and he went on. "I been wondering what you do when you make a windfall. Ten thousand dollars, say. Put it in the book, all regular-like and neat?"

"I don't know what you're talking about," Hamilton said.

"Suppose you kill a man," said Culver. "Or have someone kill him for you. Suppose he has a money belt with ten thousand dollars in it. What do you do with that?"

"I wouldn't know," said Hamilton. "It's never happened. I never thought about it."

"I'd hate to have a memory like yours," Culver told him, softly. "Bad for business. Imagine going around and forgetting a wad of cash like that."

"Look," said Hamilton. "I'm busy!"

Culver snarled savagely. "Don't try to high-hat me, Cal. You can't run a sandy on me because I know you from the bottom up. In case you've forgotten, I'm talking about Farson."

"Farson?"

"Yes, Farson. The man you had Perkins kill."

Hamilton shrugged. "Perkins probably has killed a lot of men I don't know about."

"Not Farson," said Culver, evenly. "You knew about him, all right."

"You haven't any proof," Hamilton pointed out.

"A book," said Culver.

Hamilton snickered. “Crip’s book. It would never stand in law.”

“I’m not talking about the law, Hamilton. I’m talking about a debt.”

“A debt?”

“That’s right. Ten thousand bucks. That money Farson had belonged to me.”

“You mean—”

“I mean I want the money back.”

“That’s all?”

“All for right now,” Culver told him. “After I get the cash I’m going out and find Perkins and when I’m done with him I’ll come back for you. I’ll give you that much chance, Cal. I’ll give you time to run if you want to run.”

“And if I don’t?”

“I sure hope you don’t,” said Culver.

One of Hamilton’s hands twitched nervously. “Look, Culver, we’re old friends. We knew one another back there on the river.”

Culver grinned wryly. “You’re stretching the truth some when you say that we were friends. How about starting to count out the money.”

“I haven’t got it here,” said Hamilton. “I’d have to get into the safe.”

“Okay,” said Culver. “Start getting into it.”

He moved around the desk, gun held ready. “One wrong move,” he warned, “and you’ll never finish what you’re doing.”

Hamilton swiveled the chair around, got out of it and knelt before the safe. His fingers went out to the dial and turned it, fumbling as they worked.

“You gave in pretty easy,” Culver told him. “If you got any aces up your sleeve don’t try to pull them out.”

The dial clicked and Hamilton pulled the handle of the safe. In the silence of the room, Culver heard the bolts shoot back. The hinges squealed a little as the door came open.

Another sound, a noise that was scarcely heard, brought Culver spinning around, away from the kneeling man to face the door. Perkins stood in the doorway, one hand on the doorknob, the other clutching a six-gun.

Culver jerked his own gun up, finger already tightening on the trigger. Perkins’ gun coughed harshly, like a rasping throat, and burning fire sliced its way across the knuckles of Culver’s gun hand. He felt his fingers loosen and the gun jumped from them as it fired, bouncing high into the air, then spinning to the floor.

Perkins’ gun was leveling again and behind it the man’s face was a mask of hate. Culver backed toward the wall, step by slow step.

Hamilton had swung away from the safe, was still squatting on

his heels, but he also held a gun. That's why he gave in so easy, Culver told himself. He had the gun in there and he gambled on it. But he never would have made it if it hadn't been for Perkins. He'd never had a chance to reach for it.

Culver felt the wall at his back and stood rigid, watching Perkins pace toward him, gun leveled, face twisted into livid hatefulness.

Hamilton's voice cut through the tenseness of the silence. "Perkins! Perkins, don't shoot!"

Perkins' eyes did not waver from Culver. He asked: "Why not?"

"He's got the book!" Hamilton yelled. "He's got Crip's book. He's the one that scared you off and took the book."

"Hell, all we have to do," snarled Perkins, "is to cut him down and take it."

"You fool!" Hamilton screamed. "You don't think he has it on him? He's too smart to have it on him."

"You're right, Cal," Culver said. "I haven't got it on me."

Perkins moved closer. "Where is it?" he asked.

Culver shook his head.

"Don't push your luck too far," Perkins told him, fiercely. "I got a thing or two to settle with you and I might forget myself."

"We might make a deal," said Culver.

"I'm not dealing," snapped Perkins. "Not with a man who hasn't any chips."

His right hand slammed the gun muzzle into Culver's stomach, his left came up and struck, a savage open-handed blow that rocked Culver's head.

"Next time," snarled Perkins, "I will use my fist. I'll knock every tooth you have down your dirty throat."

Culver surged away from the wall, arms half lifted, but the gun barrel boring into his stomach drove him back.

"Gut-shot men die slow and hard," said Perkins grimly, "but they always die. Try that once again and I'll let you have it."

Culver saw Perkins' fist coming and he tried to duck, but it caught him alongside the jaw and drove his head back against the wall. The fist came up again and pain exploded in his brain. He felt himself falling and a shock went through him as he hit the floor. A heavy boot slammed into his ribs and knocked him over, flat upon his back.

Through the hazy grayness that filled the room, he heard Hamilton's bawling voice.

"Perkins! Lay off for a minute. Give him a chance to talk."

He was on his hands and knees now, head hanging toward the floor, and he wondered how he got there. The last he had remembered was lying on his back.

He shook his head and saw the dark drops that sprayed upon the

floor. He lifted an unsteady hand and wiped his chin and his hand was red.

Eyes clearing, he stared along the worn pattern of the carpeting that covered the floor, and sucked in his breath. There, not more than five feet in front of him, was the gun that he had dropped. One chance; that was all that he would have.

He gathered his knees beneath him, tensed, then leaped. Pain wracked his body at the effort and his fumbling hand felt the touch of metal. His fingers tightened on the grip.

A boot crashed into his stomach and half lifted him, sent a wave of nausea through him, turned him into a watery mass of retching sickness. He felt the gun slipping from his fingers, groped for it in the blackness that rolled along the floor.

A hand reached out and grabbed the nape of his neck in steel-trap fingers, hauled him up.

In front of him he saw a face of twisted rage and a working mouth that screamed profanity. His bleary eyes caught the glint of a slashing six-gun barrel and then the barrel came down and his brain exploded.

For a long moment he lay in a torpor that was merciful, then slowly, bit by bit, he became aware of his battered body. His stomach was a piece of lead that held him down and behind his back his hands and wrists were a sharp, red ache.

Slowly, he opened his eyes, careful so that the lancing light would not hit them again. But there was no light. He lay still, eyes moving slowly to try to pick up something substantial in the darkness. One by one, he made out the dark, crouched presence of furniture. The posters of the brass bed on which he lay, catching the slight glimmer of stars through the window at his back. The table that stood beside the bed with the lamp upon it.

He moved an arm to reach out and touch the table at his side, and his arm moved an inch or two and would move no more. Sharp pain lanced from wrist to elbow.

Methodically, mechanically, he narrowed down his mind to consider his hands and his brain traced out the tortured lines of bloody rawness where the ropes bit into yielding flesh. His feet, too, lashed together at the ankles.

They would be coming back. Hamilton with his cold ruthlessness, Perkins with his twisted hate. They would come back to make him talk, and when he talked, they'd kill him.

He had to get out before the two came back. Somehow he had to escape this room. And the window was the only way. A man could break a window with his shoulder, heave his body through. He shuddered at the thought of jagged broken glass, but it was the only

way.

Carefully, noiselessly, he swung his feet off the bed, pulled them around until he could stand up. Coldness seeped into him as he stood there in the dark, coldness and a terrible sense of helplessness. He hopped, slowly, carefully, inch by inch. One hop, then another, would take him to the window.

Something tugged at his wrists and he halted, stood with cold sweat breaking out on him. His wrists not only were tied together, but were secured to the bed!

He pivoted cautiously and stared at the table with the lamp upon it. A lamp meant that there would be matches. He bent forward from the waist to bring his eyes closer to the table top, and there the matches were, a water tumbler full of them, sitting near the edge.

Cautiously, he hopped backwards, waggling fingers searching for the table's edge. He found it and halted, forced his arms backward to carry the fingers to the water tumbler.

Awkwardly one finger caught the tumbler's top, tipped it over so that the matches spilled on the table top. Scraping, fumbling, his fingers pulled the matches in a pile, then groped to find the rope that bound him to the bed.

Carefully, fumbling time after time, he piled the slack in the rope atop the matches, then stood rigid for a moment, gasping for breath.

What he had to do next would take steadiness, sureness. He could not flinch or fumble. If he knocked the matches on the floor, if he …

He managed to get a single match between two fingers, pressed the head against the table's edge, then swiftly flipped it up. Light flared in the room and dancing shadows jigged along the wall.

He held his breath,, kept the fingers closed tight upon the flaming stick, carried it back until another finger touched the pile of matches and the rope, then dropped it.

For a moment nothing happened, then another match caught with a sputter and a second, then at least a dozen, with a sudden flare of flame and the smell of burning sulphur.

Sudden flaring heat bit into his hands and the matches flared again with a sudden puff, lighting the room with a ghastly yellow glare. Another odor came through the smell of sulphur, the stench of burning rope.

He waited and the flame of the burning match-heap bit into his hands. He waited while the shadows danced and died upon the wall, then suddenly heaved himself forward. The rope caught, held for a single instant, then snapped and hurled him forward, flat upon his face. He rolled onto his side, jack-knifed with his feet, heard the crash of the falling table as his boots slammed into it.

Sitting on the floor, he stared in horror at the flame that ate into

the bedding. His thrashing feet had knocked the table over, dumped the burning matches squarely on the bed.

He heaved himself upright with a single motion, hopped desperately toward the window. Behind him the flames crackled angrily as they worked into the corn-husks. In a minute, he knew, the room would be an inferno, a roaring sheet of fire. Scant second were left to reach the window.

He stumbled and went to his knees, surged up again. The hot breath of the fire lapped against his back. Feet were running on the stairs and voices shouted. Someone had heard the table crash.

The window was before him and he gave one last hop. He stumbled and his body hit the wall and held. Desperately, he dragged his feet beneath him, lowered his shoulder to press against the window.

The boots were running across the floor just outside the door. There was no time to lose. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw a sheet of flame curl toward the ceiling, leave the papered wall black and flecked with glowing ash.

The sash buckled beneath his straining shoulder and the window popped like the explosion of a gun. Glass tinkled on the floor and the sash crashed outward. A blast of air swept into the room and the flames leaped high, mushrooming on the ceiling.

Culver thrust his head and chest through the broken window, saw the sloping roof of a shed beneath him. Lucky, said his brain. Lucky that it's there to break your fall.

He shoved with all the power that was in his feet, felt his body sliding out the window. A knife-like piece of broken glass slashed through his trousers and gouged into his thigh. Then he was falling. He hit the slant roof and rolled, then fell again.

The ground came up and smacked him, drove the breath from out of his lungs. He rolled and kept on rolling, out of the mud and into a patch of weeds.

Crouched in the weed patch, he tried to orient himself. There was the livery barn and a vacant lot and beyond that the Antlers Hotel. The hotel, he told himself, was the place to go.

He surged to his feet and hopped, hopped with every ounce of strength that was in his body. Grass caught at his feet and tripped him and he got up again, hopped on, in a desperate race with time.

Men were yelling on the street, feet were pounding on the sidewalks. Someone was shouting in a bull-like voice, over and over again: "Fire! Fire! Fire!"

He wasted precious seconds to glance over his shoulder, saw that the Crystal Bar was a mass of twisting flame all along its second story. He glanced around again, stared upward at the hotel windows,

suddenly shouted at a figure standing in one lighted square.

"Nancy! Nancy! It's Culver!"

He stumbled to his knees, fought his way upright again.

Nancy Atwood had opened her window, was leaning out.

"Nancy!" he shouted.

His feet caught on a discarded wooden box and he went down again into a tangled, beaten heap.

CHAPTER FIVE
Fist Fight in Hell

The ground was soft and cool beneath him and the shouting of the men out in the street was a muted sound, as if from far away. Culver lay face down and waited. His mind was, for the moment, blank, resting too from the horror of the fire, from the unreasoning fear of an animal that is trapped and cornered.

Beating hoofs went by and roused him, twisted him upward from the ground. A horse went past, mane flying in the garish light of the burning building, feet pounding in terror. Someone had gotten into the livery barn and was turning loose the horses before the fire could spread from the flaming barroom.

He struggled to his knees, tried to rise to his feet, sank back again when his tortured ankles screamed in pain. Other horses galloped past, wild eyes gleaming in the light. Above the yelling of the men out in the street came the clank of buckets. A fire-fighting line was being formed, passing buckets filled with water from man to man, probably to wet down the livery barn. For there could be no hope of saving the Crystal Bar. The place was a torch that towered into the night, a pillar of curling fire topped by dense black smoke, seen faintly in the first grayness of the coming dawn.

"Grant!"

Culver twisted around, saw the girl running toward him, coat wrapped about her, hair flying across her shoulders.

"Nancy!" he shouted. "Over here, Nancy."

He struggled to his feet as she came up.

She stopped before him, for a moment said no word, staring at him, face flushed by the flaring fire.

"What happened?" she asked.

"There's a knife in my vest pocket," he told her. "That is, if it hasn't fallen out. No, the lower one on the right."

Her fingers found it, brought it out.

"It was because of Bob," she sobbed. "You got into all this trouble because of what you did for him. He told me."

He shook his head. "It was something else," he said.

She hacked at the rope that bound his wrists and he felt it loosen and fall away. His arms fell to his side and he lifted them in front of him. The wrists looked like so much raw meat and the hands were streaked with blood.

"Now your feet," said Nancy. "Sit down so I can get at them."

"Let me," he said.

He reached out his hand and she gave him the knife. Seated, he hacked at the cords savagely.

"But what's it all about?" she asked. "The fire and you out here like this."

"Plenty," he told her. "You see, I set the fire."

He snapped the blade of the knife, returned it to his pocket.

"That man you were asking about all the way out," said Nancy. "You found him?"

Culver shook his head. "No, I didn't find him, but I found what happened to him. And this is just a start."

He reeled to his feet, stamped to bring back the circulation.

"You better get back inside," he said. "It's no place for you out here. Thanks for coming down."

Above the crackle of the fire and the shouting in the street, he heard the rush of feet behind him, swung around. With a yell of warning, he thrust out a hand at Nancy, sent her reeling back.

Perkins was running forward through the flame-streaked darkness. The gun in his hand glittered.

Culver ducked swiftly, heard the angry hum of the bullet above his shoulder. His fingers scooped along the ground and clutched the edge of the wooden box that had tripped him. Straightening quickly, he hurled it in an overhanded throw at the charging man.

The six-gun barked again. Then the box crunched into Perkins, sent him reeling sidewise, staggering.

Culver leaped forward savagely and felt the heat of the muzzle flare as the gun coughed. Then his hand chopped down with a savage blow that caught the wrist behind the gun. And even as he struck, he swung again, a looping right that started at his belt and came up in a jarring smash against Perkins' jaw. Perkins dropped the gun.

Culver stepped in close with punching fists that worked like driving pistons. Perkins gave ground slowly, stubbornly, covering up.

Culver's foot caught in a tangled clump of grass, threw him off balance, gave Perkins the chance that he had been awaiting. Culver sensed the smashing fist rather than saw it, got his elbow up, but only partially blocked it. It skidded along his forearm and exploded on his jaw.

Perkins' right was coming in again and he ducked against it, slammed up blindly with his left. He felt his fist strike yielding flesh and sink into it with a hollow thud. Then Perkins' blow connected and jarred him to his toes. Culver's right worked automatically, lashing out with a desperate strength.

Perkins' head was a punching bag swaying in the mist … a head that bobbed and tossed. Culver stepped close and swung his left and the head snapped over, rocking on the neck. Culver's right came up, a

blow that started from boot-top level, that gained speed as it came, that had the hunched, pivoting power of 180 pounds of bone and muscle behind it.

The head was gone and Culver did not know where he was, for the head had been all that he had to go by. He raised one of his hands and ran it across his eyes, stared at the flaming wreckage of the Crystal Bar. Perkins was a dark shape on the ground, a twisted, battered shape.

Culver felt a hand upon his arm and turned around. It was Nancy Atwood. He lifted a hand and ran it across his mouth, wiping off the blood that trickled from a battered lip.

"Here," she said and he saw that she was holding a six-gun.

Numbly he reached out and took it, thrust it in the waistband of his trousers.

"Where did you get it?" he demanded.

"I picked it up," said Nancy. "It was the one he dropped when you hit him. I was trying to—"

He gasped. "You mean you were trying to shoot Perkins."

She nodded, half sobbing. "But you were always in the way. I was afraid of hitting you."

He lifted an awkward arm around her shoulder, drew her close. "You're all right," he said, thickly.

She looked up into his face. "What's it all about, Grant?"

He told her briefly, quickly. "They killed Mark for his money. My money. The money he had in his belt. Killed him and buried him at night, somewhere in the hills. And it's not the only case. There have been others like it. Men killed, men robbed and cheated.

"The river was dying," he said. "Fewer boats were traveling and the passenger lists were thinner. Mark and I figured we ought to move to fresher fields and so he came out ahead to look them over. Headed for here first because we'd heard Gun Gulch was a good town."

He shivered in the rising wind of dawn.

"Let's go back to the hotel," said the girl. "Bob will be wondering what it's all about and a little soap and water wouldn't hurt your face."

Side by side they walked across the vacant lot toward the sidewalk.

The fire in the Crystal Bar had almost burned itself out, but the street still rang with turmoil. Horses, freed from the livery stable, moved like ghosts in the first gray light of dawn. Culver stared over his shoulder at the smouldering ruins of the Crystal Bar and a faint, grim smile tugged at his lips. I didn't do it deliberately, he told himself, but I sure paid Hamilton off for a part of what he did.

Nancy stopped short, clutching Culver's arm. "Look, Grant. That

man out there. What are they doing to him?"

Culver stared at the circle of men standing in the muddy street, shouting at the man they had thrust onto a wagon box. Even from where he stood, he could see the rope around the man's neck and the deathly, twisted pallor that sat upon his face.

"You get back to the hotel, quick," he snapped at the girl.

With swift strides he crossed the vacant lot, stepped onto the sidewalk. From the opposite side of the street a bull voice bellowed. "Somebody start getting them horses. We ain't got all night to waste."

Another voice laughed. "Hold onto your shirt, Mike. It's almost morning now."

Culver reached out and tapped the shoulder of the man who stood in front of him. "What's going on?" he asked.

The man turned around and Culver saw that it was Jake, the printer.

Jake spat deliberately into the mud before he answered. "We're going to hang the lousy son," he said. "Just as soon as we round up some horses to take him out where we can find a tree, we're going to string him up. Got to do something to convince folks around here it ain't healthy to go out and burn down other people's property."

He spat in the mud again. "Course, no one gives a damn about the Crystal Bar, but it's a menace, that's what it is. That fire might of spread to the livery barn. Might have burned down half the town. The boys worked hard to save it and they ain't in no mood for shilly-shallying."

Culver sucked his breath in sharply. "You mean you figure that fellow set the fire?"

"Set it or had someone set it," said Jake. "Logical man to do it. Hated Hamilton's guts, he did. Feller I was telling you about. Barney Brown, over at the Golden Slipper."

"But you aren't giving him a chance," protested Culver. "You should have a trial. Let him have a say about this hanging business."

"Hell," Jake said, disgustedly, "he'd deny he done it. Stands to reason he would. Him and Hamilton was fixing for a showdown and Barney got the jump on Hamilton, that's all. Other way around, if the Golden Slipper had burned down, we'd hang Hamilton."

Culver lifted his head, stared at Barney Brown. The man was scared clean through. Standing there in the wagonbox with the rope around his neck he suddenly was pitiful. His waistcoat was unbuttoned and his cravat fluttered in the wind. His hand came up nervously and clutched the rope that hung around his shoulders, then jerked away as if his fingers had touched a red-hot iron.

The crowd roared with laughter and the bull-like voice jeered:

"Don't like the feel of it, Barney? Just wait until we tighten it a

little."

Someone yelled, "Where are those damn horses."

"Let's grab hold of that wagon and take it out ourselves," shouted someone else. "We got enough men here. We can do it easy."

Culver felt revulsion twisting at his vitals. A pack of cowards, he told himself. A pack of wolves. Big and smart and loud-mouthed because there were a lot of them because they could do whatever they wanted to do with Barney Brown and no one would hurt them.

He raised his voice. "You gents got the wrong man," he shouted at them.

Silence fell, a shocked and restless silence. Heads turned to stare at him.

A growl came from the crowd, a fierce angry sound. The voice of the pack that is being robbed of the deer it has pulled down.

Beyond the wagon a huge man was moving forward, lumbering through the sea of faces, and the crowd parted quickly to let him pass.

Motionless on the sidewalk, Culver stood and watched him come. Huge and hairy, massive of shoulder, with a bushy beard and hair that hung down his neck and curled upward in a drake's tail above the collar of his heavy woolen shirt.

It was the man with the bull voice, he knew. The man who had shouted the loudest and angriest, who had jeered at Brown … the man the men called Mike.

Six feet away Mike stopped, stood with arms akimbo, staring up at Culver.

"You said something, stranger?" he asked and his voice was like a drum beating in the street.

"I said you had the wrong man," said Culver. "I'm the one who set that fire."

A murmur ran through the crowd and it stirred suddenly, then settled back again, like a pack of wolves.

"All right," said Mike, "we'll hang you instead of Brown."

He took a slow step forward and the crowd surged into life. Angry voices spat screaming words at Culver and through the words he heard the splashing, sucking sound of feet moving through the mud.

From behind him, a cyclonic figure flung itself at Culver, coat flying in the wind. A hand reached out and snatched the six-gun from his waistband, brought it up. Culver's hand flashed out to grasp the gun and the flare of the muzzle blast was a hot breath against his palm.

Out in the muddy street, Mike reeled back, bull voice bellowing, hand clapped to his right forearm.

The crowd stopped, stood stock-still, the angry words frozen in their mouths, boots rooted in the mud.

Culver's fingers closed upon the gun, wrenched it away from Nancy Atwood.

"I thought I told you—" he began, but she interrupted him in a rush of tumbling words.

"You big lummox, you'd stand there and never stir, even when you had a gun. Can't you see what would happen to you if you didn't stop them?"

Her voice caught and broke and she stood on the sidewalk, huddled against the terror of the moment, hands pulling the coat tight around her body.

Culver hefted the six-gun in his hand, looked out over the crowd.

"You boys still want to hang me?" he asked, softly.

They did not stir or move.

Culver looked at Mike. The man looked back, hand still clutching his forearm, blood oozing out between his fingers.

"How about it, Mike?" asked Grant Culver.

The big man shifted his footing. "Maybe we were a bit worked up," he said. "Maybe we should of asked if you had a reason for starting that fire."

Culver grinned. "That's more like it. You can't hang a man legal without having a trial. I'm plumb ready to stand trial any time."

A buzzing thing snarled past his ear and from the vacant lot came the coughing spang of a high-powered rifle.

Gun still in hand, Culver whirled around. The rifle coughed again and he felt the searing burn of the bullet as it spun across his ribs.

Out in the vacant lot Calvin Hamilton was running in great leaps toward a saddled horse by the hotel corner. Culver sprang forward, six-gun talking as he ran. Hamilton stumbled once, but regained his feet, ran on. With a yell, he vaulted into the saddle and the horse hammered out of sight behind the building.

Breath gasping in his throat, Culver rounded the hotel corner. From somewhere ahead a rifle hammered and he heard the whine of a heavy bullet passing overhead.

In the space between the hotel and barber shop swift hoofs pounded and a startled horse leaped out into the open.

"Whoa, boy!" Culver yelled.

Moving swiftly forward as the animal wheeled to run, Culver leaped desperately, caught the flying mane in a steel-trap grasp. His toes dragged for a moment as the horse sidled, then he sprang and the horse rose on its hind legs, fighting. Culver clung desperately, digging in his heels.

Then the horse was down again and running … running in the right direction. In the direction that Hamilton had taken.

CHAPTER SIX
Trail's End

No saddle, no bridle, just a horse. One of the horses that had been turned out of the livery barn when it had been feared that it might catch fire.

No bridle, but the horse was going in the right direction, angling from behind the buildings to come into the street, striking the trail that led out of town, running with driving legs spurred by surprise and fear.

Far up the trail, Culver could see Hamilton and his mount, hazy figures in the gray dawn light. Culver bent low along the horse's neck, spoke soothing words aimed at the laid-back ears. If the horse only would keep going, perhaps he could handle him even without a bridle. Cuff his head to turn him in the right direction, kick him in the ribs in lieu of spurs.

He rode bent forward, the whistle of the wind a roaring in his ears punctuated by the pounding hoofbeats of the working legs beneath him.

Hamilton had disappeared in a dip in the trail, but he reappeared again. Culver strained his eyes. The man seemed closer than he had before. Hope rose in him.

"Maybe we can overhaul him, hoss," he said. "Maybe you and I can do it."

He reached for the waistband of his trousers, hauled out the six-gun. And even as he did it, a sudden thought struck him with paralyzing force. Perkins had fired the gun twice. Nancy had used it once. That had left three cartridges. Culver's heart sank at the thought that came. How many times had he, himself, pulled the trigger when he ran across the vacant lot in pursuit of Hamilton?

With fumbling fingers, he spun the cylinder, gulped in relief. There was one live shell. He'd only used two shots back there in the vacant lot. But one shell! One bullet! One bullet against the bullets that Hamilton must carry in the heavy rifle!

The trial was rising into higher land, was becoming ever more twisted and tortuous than it had been before. To the left the land sloped up in jagged cliffs and rocky talus slides, with scrawny pines struggling for footholds, while to the right the ground plunged down in frozen anguish.

He was gaining on Hamilton. Culver knew. Each time the man reappeared after being hidden by an angle in the trail, he had lost ground. Once he swiveled in his saddle and raised the gun to his

shoulder, but brought it down again without pulling the trigger.

Culver leaned downward, patted the horse's neck. "Keep going," he told him. "Keep on going."

Up ahead a rifle roared and even as it did, Culver heard the *spat* of the heavy bullet hitting flesh. Beneath him the horse broke its gait and stumbled, front knees folding in mid-stride. The outstretched head pitched forward and Culver felt himself spin into the air.

On hands and knees, Culver dived for the side of the trail, forced his way into a sprawling clump of cedars that clambered over two tilted boulders. The rifle *spanged* again and the bullet pinged against one of the boulders, went howling into space.

Hugging the ground, Culver glanced toward the trail. The horse lay crumpled in the road, with a pool of blood darkening the wheel ruts. Hamilton, he knew, had deliberately shot the animal. Had gambled rifle against sixgun in a shoot-out on this rocky mountainside.

Culver grimaced. The odds were heavier than Hamilton could guess. With only one cartridge left in the six-shooter, he had virtually no chance at all. Up on the slope the rifle churned three quick shots and the bullets chunked wickedly into the cedar brake.

He's trying to smoke me out, Culver told himself. Only thing to do would be to work up the hill to the left of Hamilton's position, taking advantage of screening boulders and scrawny thickets of evergreen. Get above Hamilton so that he would have to come out. Culver surged to his feet and ran, bent low, zig-zagging, fighting his way up the debris-strewn slope.

Something slapped Culver in the shoulder and he was going over, plunging in a dizzy spin toward the jumbled rocks that lay under-foot. As if they did not belong to him, as if they were separate entities, he knew that his feet were fighting to hold him upright. But there was nothing they could do.

He reached out a hand and the hand fell limp. The fingers curled around a head-sized rock, curled and gripped and then slid off and sprawled upon the ground.

Hamilton got me, he thought. Got me just like he got Farson and Crip. Only this time he did it with his own hands instead of someone else's. He'll be coming out, figuring I am dead. Only he'll probably come over to make sure and when he finds I'm not he'll put another bullet into me.

Culver lay face down upon the rocks and felt their coolness through his clothing. Pretty soon, he thought, that shoulder will begin to hurt like hell. Only probably, by that time I will be dead. If I move now, I'm dead, for Hamilton must be walking up and he'll have the rifle ready. To the right he heard the scrape of leather on rock and

knew the man was coming. Why not use that cartridge? Why not take a chance? It wouldn't be the first time. Back on the river they said that Grant Culver would take a chance on anything. On the flip of a card, on the trickle of two raindrops running down a window, on impossible chances with a gun … on almost anything.

"A mean man to tangle with," they said, "because he doesn't give a damn."

And why should he now? He was as good as dead. When Hamilton saw he still had life in him, he would blast it out with a bullet from the rifle.

Culver lay and listened to the crunch of feet, to the rattle of the stones that loosened and rattled down the hillside. Thirty feet away, thought Culver. Ten paces. I'll let him come a little closer. He counted the steps. One, two, three, four … five paces now!

He tensed himself, wedged one toe against a rock, and then heaved upward, like a wounded bear rising on hind legs. His hand was moving for the gun sticking in his waistband, moving with the old precision, with the same detached efficiency which it always used.

Before him Hamilton had stopped, mouth open in astonishment, feet spread apart as if he'd frozen in mid-stride when Culver moved. But the rifle was coming up, the barrel a shining sweep of metal that pointed from the hip. Culver felt the six-gun come free and tilt upward in his fist. The rifle muzzle spit flame and smoke and a savage hand clutched at Culver's shirt and twitched it viciously.

Triumph surged in Culver's brain and his hand was sure. The six-gun bucked against his palm and the sound of its ugly bark echoed in his ears.

Out on the rocks, Hamilton stumbled forward, as if he had started to run and tripped. His hand came open and the rifle dropped and the man was pitching forward.

Culver let his gun-hand sag, stood and watched Hamilton hit the ground. A dawn wind came rustling up the hillside and stirred the cedar brakes. Hamilton was a huddled darkness on the rocks.

"Mark," said Culver, "I guess I'll go back to the river. This isn't the kind of country for the likes of us."

He stuffed the six-gun back into his waistband, staggered down the hill on unsteady feet. The shoulder was hurting now, aching with a pounding pain that hammered through his body.

From the trail below came the sound of hoofs. The boys from Gun Gulch, he thought, coming out to see what it's all about. He reached the trail as they hammered up the slope.

Mike, the burly man Nancy had shot, was in the lead. A lump beneath his shirt sleeve betrayed a bandaged arm. Behind him was Jake, the printer, with about a dozen others. They pulled up, sat their

horses in the trail, staring at him.

He shook his head at them. “Too late, gents,” he said. “You missed all the fun. Hamilton is up there.”

Mike chuckled in his beard. “Been having considerable fun yourself,” he said. “Looks like Hamilton might have pegged you.”

“He did,” Culver told him. “But I pegged him back.”

“Hang it, Mike,” snapped Jake, “don’t sit there gabbing. The man is all shot up. Let’s get him back to town.”

“Sure, sure,” agreed Mike. ”The lady will give us hell if we don’t get him back.” He ruffled his beard with a ham-like hand and chuckled. “First time I ever got shot by a woman, so help me.”

“We found Perkins out in the vacant lot,” said Jake, “and he spilled his guts. We’re going to string him up just as soon as we get back.”

“You mean there won’t be any trial for me?”

“No trial,” said Jake.

“Then,” said Culver, “I’ll be going down to the river. Not so exciting, maybe, but a whole lot healthier.”

“Look, stranger,” protested Mike, “we was just figuring how maybe you would stay here.”

Culver shook his head. “I’m a gambling man,” he told them. “My place is back on the boats again.”

“Always deal them straight?” asked Jake.

“Sure,” said Culver. “A man that can’t deal them straight and win had better quit the game.”

“Just the man we want,” said Jake.

“But—”

Mike interrupted. “Seems as how Brown figures on getting out of Gun Gulch. He’s offering the Golden Slipper for sale … real cheap.”

“The boys,” said Jake, “would like to have you run it. Long as they’re going to lose their money anyhow, they’d rather lose it honest.”

“If you’re a little short on cash,” Mike told him, “the boys will pass the hat.”

Culver laughed quietly. “Don’t see how I can disappoint you gents.”

Mike climbed off his horse. “Take it easy with that shoulder,” he said. “Up you go.”

“But you—”

“Hell,” growled Mike, “I take a long walk every morning, anyhow.”

He held up a massive paw and Culver took it, felt the smooth, hard grip.

“You better get going,” said Mike. “The little lady’s waiting for

you.”

The Sitters

On September 9, 1957, Cliff Simak wrote in his journal that he was "Beginning to get interested in Baby Sitter plot," but thereafter, he apparently had trouble with it. On September 27, he wrote, "Unable for some reason to finish Sitters. Came out wrong. May have to recast ending." But then, on October 6, he wrote "Gold called, needed story"—so Cliff finished typing it and sent it off the next day; and it appeared in the April 1958 issue of Galaxy Science Fiction.

In later years, Cliff would describe the story as one that pleased him; but I keep wondering if it isn't a sort of horror story.

—dww

The first week of school was finished. Johnson Dean, superintendent of Millville High, sat at his desk, enjoying the quiet and the satisfaction of late Friday afternoon.

The quiet was massacred by Coach Jerry Higgins. He clomped into the office and threw his muscular blond frame heavily in a chair.

"Well, you can call off football for the year," he said angrily. "We can drop out of the conference."

Dean pushed away the papers on which he had been working and leaned back in his chair. The sunlight from the western windows turned his silver thatch into a seeming halo. His pale, blue-veined, wrinkled hands smoothed out, painstakingly, the fading crease in his fading trousers.

"What has happened now?" he asked.

"It's King and Martin, Mr. Dean. They aren't coming out this year."

Dean clucked sympathetically, but somewhat hollowly, as if his heart was not quite in it. "Let me see," he said. "If I remember rightly, those two were very good last year. King was in the line and Martin quarterback."

Higgins exploded in righteous indignation. "Who ever heard of a quarterback deciding he wouldn't play no more? And not just an ordinary boy, but one of the very best. He made all-conference last year."

"You've talked to them, of course?"

"I got down on my knees to them," said the coach. "I asked them did they want that I should lose my job. I asked is there anything you got against me. I told them they were letting down the school. I told

them we wouldn't have a team without them. They didn't laugh at me, but—"

"They wouldn't laugh at you," said Dean. "Those boys are gentlemen. In fact, all the youngsters in school—"

"They're a pack of sissies!" stormed the coach.

Dean said gently, "That is a matter of opinion. There have been moments when I also wasn't able to attach as much importance to football as it seemed to me I should."

"But that's different," argued the coach. "When a man grows up, naturally he will lose some interest. But these are kids. This just isn't healthy. These young fellows should be out there pawing up the earth. All kids should have a strong sense of competition. And even if they don't, there's the financial angle. Any outstanding football man has a chance, when he goes to college—"

"Our kids don't need athletic subsidies," said Dean, a little sharply. "They're getting more than their share of scholastic scholarships."

"If we had a lot more material," moaned Higgins, "King and Martin wouldn't mean so much. We wouldn't win too often, but we still would have a team. But as it is—do you realize, Mr. Dean, that there have been fewer coming out each year? Right now, I haven't more than enough—"

"You've talked to King and Martin. You're sure they won't reconsider?"

"You know what they told me? They said football interfered with studies!"

The way Higgins said it, it was rank heresy.

"I guess, then," Dean said cheerfully, "that we'll just have to face it."

"But it isn't normal," the coach protested. "There aren't any kids who think more of studies than they do of football. There aren't any kids so wrapped up in books—"

"There are," said Dean. "There are a lot, right here at Millville. You should take a look at the grade averages over the past ten years, if you don't believe it."

"What gets me is that they don't act like kids. They act like a bunch of adults." The coach shook his head, as if to say it was all beyond him. "It's a dirty shame. If only some of those big bruisers would turn out, we'd have the makings of a team."

"Here, also," Dean reminded him, "we have the makings of men and women that Millville in the future may very well be proud of."

The coach got up angrily. "We won't win a game," he warned. "Even Bagley will beat us."

"That is something," Dean observed philosophically, "that shan't

worry me too much."

He sat quietly at his desk and listened to the hollow ringing of the coach's footsteps going down the corridor, dimming out with distance.

And he heard the swish and rumble of a janitorial servo-mechanism wiping down the stairs. He wondered where Stuffy was. Fiddling around somewhere, no doubt. With all the scrubbers and the washers and wipers and other mechanical contraptions, there wasn't too much to take up Stuffy's time. Although Stuffy, in his day, had done a lot of work—he'd been on the go from dark to dark, a top-notch janitor.

If it weren't for the labor shortage, Stuffy would have been retired several years ago. But they didn't retire men any more the way they had at one time. With Man going to the stars, there now was more than the human race could do. If they had been retiring men, Dean thought, he himself would be without a job.

And there was nothing he would have hated more than that. For Millville High was his. He had made it his. For more than fifty years, he'd lived for Millville High, first as a young and eager teacher, then as principal, and now, the last fifteen years or so, as its superintendent.

He had given everything he had. And it had given back. It had been wife and child and family, a beginning and an end. And he was satisfied, he told himself—satisfied on this Friday of a new school year, with Stuffy puttering somewhere in the building and no football team--or, at least, next to none.

He rose from the desk and stood looking out the window. A student, late in going home, was walking across the lawn. Dean thought he knew her, although of late his eyes had not been so good for distance.

He squinted at her harder, almost certain it was Judy Charleson. He'd known her grandfather back in the early days and the girl, he thought, had old Henry Charleson's gait. He chuckled, thinking back. Old Charleson, he recalled, had been a slippery one in a business deal. There had been that time he had gotten tangled up in the deal for tube-liners to be used by a starship outfit …

He jerked his mind away, tried to wipe out his thinking of the old days. It was a sign of advancing age, the dawn of second childhood.

But however that might be, old Henry Charleson was the only man in Millville who had ever had a thing to do with starships—except Lamont Stiles.

Dean grinned a little, remembering Lamont Stiles and the grimness in him and how he'd amounted to something after many years, to the horrified exasperation of many people who had confidently prophesied he'd come to no good end.

And there was no one now, of course, who knew, or perhaps would ever know, what kind of end Lamont Stiles had finally come to. Or if, in fact, he'd come to an end as yet.

Lamont Stiles, Dean thought, might this very moment be striding down the street of some fantastic city on some distant world.

And if that were so, and if he came home again, what would he bring this time?

The last time he'd come home—the only time he ever had come home—he had brought the Sitters, and they were a funny lot.

Dean turned from the window and walked back to the desk. He sat down and pulled the papers back in front of him. But he couldn't get down to work. That was the way it often was. He'd start thinking of the old days, when there were many friends and many things to do, and get so involved in thinking that he couldn't settle down to work.

He heard the shuffle coming along the hall and shoved the papers to one side. He could tell that it was Stuffy, from the familiar shuffle, coming by to pass the time of day.

Dean wondered at the quiet anticipation he felt within himself. Although it was not so strange, once one considered it. There weren't many left like Stuffy, not many he could talk with.

It was odd with the old, he thought. Age dissolved or loosened the ties of other days. The old died or moved away or were bound by infirmities. Or they drew within themselves, into a world of their own, where they sought a comfort they could find no longer in the outer world.

Stuffy shuffled to the doorway, stopped and leaned against the jamb. He wiped his drooping yellow mustaches with a greasy hand.

"What's ailing the coach?" he asked. "He went busting out of here like he was turpentined."

"He has no football team," said Dean. "Or he tells me that he hasn't any."

"He cries early every season," Stuffy said. "It's just an act."

"I'm not so sure this time. King and Martin aren't coming out."

Stuffy shuffled a few more paces into the room and dropped into a chair.

"It's them Sitters," Stuffy declared. "They're the cause of it."

Dean sat upright. "What is that you said!"

"I been watching it for years. You can spot the kids that the Sitters sat with or that went to their nursery school. They done something to them kids."

"Fairy tale," said Dean.

"It ain't a fairy tale," Stuffy declared stubbornly. "You know I don't take no stock in superstition. Just because them Sitters are from some other planet … Say, did you ever find out what planet they were

from?"

Dean shook his head. "I don't know that Lamont ever said. He might have, but I never heard it."

"They're weird critters," said Stuffy, stroking his mustaches slowly to lend an air of deliberation to his words, "but I never held their strangeness against them. After all, they ain't the only aliens on the Earth. The only ones we have in Millville, of course, but there are thousands of other critters from the stars scattered round the Earth."

Dean nodded in agreement, scarcely knowing what he was agreeing with. He said nothing, however, for there was no need of that. Once Stuffy got off to a running start, he'd go on and on.

"They seem right honest beings," Stuffy said. "They never played on no one's sympathy. They just settled in, after Lamont went away and left them, and never asked no one to intercede for them. They made an honest living all these years and that is all one could expect of them."

"And yet," said Dean, "you think they've done something to the kids."

"They changed them. Ain't you noticed it?"

Dean shook his head. "I never thought to notice. I've known these youngsters for years. I knew their folks before them. How do you think they were changed?"

"They grew them up too fast," Stuffy said.

"Talk sense," snapped Dean. "Who grew what too fast?"

"The Sitters grew the kids too fast. That's what's wrong with them. Here they are in high school and they're already grown up."

From somewhere on one of the floors below came the dismal hooting of a servo-mechanism in distress.

Stuffy sprang to his feet. "That's the mopper-upper. I'll bet you it got caught in a door again."

He swung around and galloped off at a rapid shuffle.

"Stupid machine!" he yelped as he went out the door.

Dean pulled the papers back in front of him again and picked up a pencil. It was getting late and he had to finish.

But he didn't see the papers. He saw many little faces staring up at him from where the papers lay—solemn, big-eyed little faces with an elusive look about them.

And he knew that elusive look—the look of dawning adulthood staring out of childish faces.

They grew them up too fast!

"No," said Dean to himself. "No, it couldn't be!"

And yet there was corroborative evidence: The high averages, the unusual number of scholarships, the disdain for athletics. And, as well, the general attitude. And the lack of juvenile delinquency—for years,

Millville had been proud that its juvenile delinquency had been a minor problem. He remembered that several years ago he had been asked to write an article about it for a parent-teacher magazine.

He tried to remember what he had written in that article and slowly bits of it came back to him—the realization of parents that their children were a part of the family and not mere appendages; the role played by the churches of the town; the emphasis placed on the social sciences by the schools.

"And was I wrong?" he asked himself. "Was it none of these, but something else entirely—someone else entirely?"

He tried to work and couldn't. He was too upset. He could not erase the smiling little faces that were staring up at him.

Finally he shoved the papers in a drawer and got up from the desk. He put on his worn topcoat and sat the battered old black felt hat atop his silver head.

On the ground floor, he found Stuffy herding the last of the servo-mechanisms into their cubby for the night. Stuffy was infuriated.

"It got itself caught in a heating grill," he raged. "If I hadn't gotten there in the nick of time, it would have wrecked the works." He shook his head dolefully. "Them machines are fine when everything goes well. But just let something happen and they panic. It was best the old way, John."

Stuffy slammed the door on the last of the waddling machines and locked it savagely.

"Stuffy, how well did you know Lamont Stiles?" asked Dean.

Stuffy rubbed his mustaches in fine deliberation. "Knew him well. Lamont and me, we were kids together. You were a little older. You were in the crowd ahead."

Dean nodded his head slowly. "Yes, I remember, Stuffy. Odd that you and I stayed on in the old home town. So many of the others left."

"Lamont ran away when he was seventeen. There wasn't much to stay for. His old lady was dead and his old man was drinking himself to death and Lamont had been in a scrape or two. Everyone was agreed Lamont never would amount to nothing."

"It's hard for a boy when a whole town turns against him."

"That's a fact," said the janitor. "There was no one on his side. He told me when he left that someday he'd come back and show them. But I just thought he was talking big. Like a kid will do, you know, to bolster up himself."

"You were wrong," said Dean.

"Never wronger, John."

For Lamont Stiles had come back, more than thirty years after he had run away, back to the old weather-beaten house on Maple Street that had waited empty for him all the lonely years; had come back, an

old man when he still was scarcely fifty, big and tough despite the snow-white hair and the skin turned cordovan with the burn of many alien suns; back from far wandering among the distant stars.

But he was a stranger. The town remembered him; he had forgotten it. Years in alien lands had taken the town and twisted it in his brain, and what he remembered of it was more fantasy than truth —the fantasy spawned by years of thinking back and of yearning and of hate.

"I must go," Dean said. "Carrie will have supper ready. She doesn't like to have it getting cold."

"Good night, John," said the janitor.

The sun was almost down when Dean came out the door and started down the walk. It was later than he'd thought. Carrie would be sore at him and she would bawl him out.

Dean chuckled to himself. There was no one quite like Carrie.

Not wife, for he'd never had a wife. Not mother or sister, for both of those were dead. But housekeeper, faithful all the years—and a bit of wife and sister, and sometimes even mother.

A man's loyalties are queer, he thought. They blind him and they bind him and they shape the man he is. And, through them, he serves and achieves a kind of greatness, although at times the greatness may be gray and pallid and very, very quiet.

Not like the swaggering and the bitter greatness of Lamont Stiles, who came striding from the stars, bringing with him those three queer creatures who became the Sitters. Bringing them and installing them in his house on Maple Street and then, in a year or two, going off to the stars again and leaving them in Millville.

Queer, Dean thought, that so provincial a town as this should accept so quietly these exotic beings. Queerer still that the mothers of the town, in time, should entrust their children to the aliens' care.

As Dean turned the corner into Lincoln Street, he met a woman walking with a knee-high boy.

It was Mildred Anderson, he saw—or had been Mildred Anderson, but she was married now and for the life of him he could not recall the name. Funny, he thought, how fast the young ones grew up. Not more than a couple of years ago, it seemed, that Mildred was in school —although he knew he must be wrong on that; it would be more like ten.

He tipped his hat, "Good evening, Mildred. My, how the boy is growing."

"I doe to cool," the child lisped.

His mother interpreted. "He means he goes to school. He is so proud of it."

"Nursery school, of course."

“Yes, Mr. Dean. The Sitters. They are such lovely things. And so good with children. And there’s the cost. Or, rather, the lack of it. You just give them a bouquet of flowers or a little bottle of perfume or a pretty picture and they are satisfied. They positively refuse to take any money. I can’t understand that. Can you, Mr. Dean?”

“No,” said Dean. “I can’t.”

He’d forgotten what a talker Mildred was. There had been a period in school, he recalled, when she had been appropriately nicknamed Gabby.

“I sometimes think,” she said, hurrying on so she’d miss no time for talk, “that we people here on Earth attach too much importance to money. The Sitters don’t seem to know what money is, or if they do, they pay no attention to it. As if it were something that was not important. But I understand there are other races like that. It makes one think, doesn’t it, Mr. Dean?”

And he remembered now another infuriating trait of Mildred’s—how she inevitably ended any string of sentences with a dangling question.

He didn’t try to answer. He knew an answer was not expected of him.

“I must be getting on,” he said. “I am late already.”

“It was nice to see you, Mr. Dean,” said Mildred. “I so often think of my days in school and sometimes it seems like just positively ages and there are other times when it seems no more than just yesterday and …”

“Very nice, indeed,” said Dean, lifting his hat to her, then almost scurrying off.

It was undignified, he grumbled to himself, being routed in broad daylight on a public street by a talkative woman.

As he went up the walk to the house, he heard Carrie bustling angrily about.

“Johnson Dean,” she cried the instant he came in the door, “you sit right down and eat. Your food’s already cold. And it’s my circle night. Don’t you even stop to wash.”

Dean calmly hung up his hat and coat.

“For that matter,” he said, “I guess I don’t need to wash. My kind of job, a man doesn’t get too dirty.”

She was bustling about in the dining area, pouring his cup of coffee and straightening up the bouquet of mums that served for the centerpiece.

“Since it’s my circle night,” she said, laying deliberate stress upon the words to shame him for being late, “I won’t stay to wash the dishes. You just leave them on the table. I will do them later.”

He sat down meekly to eat.

Somehow, for some reason he could not understand, fulfilling a need of which he was not aware, he suddenly felt safe. Safe and secure against a nagging worry and a half-formed fear that had been building up within him without his knowing it.

Carrie came through the living room, settling a determined hat upon her determined head. She had the very air of a woman who was late for her circle meeting through no fault of her own. She halted at the door.

"You got everything you need?" she asked, her eyes making a swift inventory of the table.

"Everything." He chuckled. "Have a good time at the circle. Pick up a lot of gossip."

It was his favorite quip and he knew it irked her—and it was childish, too. But he could not resist it.

She flounced out of the door and he heard her putting down her heels with unnecessary firmness as she went down the walk.

With her going, a hard silence gripped the house and the deeper dusk moved in as he sat at the table eating.

Safe, he thought—old Johnson Dean, school man, safe inside the house his grandfather had built—how many years ago? Old-fashioned now, with its split-level floor plan and its high-bricked fireplace, with its double, attached garage and the planter out in front.

Safe and lonely.

And safe against what threat, against what creeping disturbance, so subtle that it failed of recognition?

He shook his head at that.

But lonely—that was different. That could be explained. The middle-young, he thought, and the very old are lonely. The middle-young because full communication had not been established, and the very old because communication had broken down.

Society was stratified, he told himself, stratified and sectored and partitioned off by many different factors—by age, by occupation, by education, by financial status. And the list did not end there. One could go on and on. It would be interesting, if a man could only find the time, to chart the stratification of humanity. Finished, if it ever could be finished, that chart would be a weird affair.

He finished the meal and wiped his mouth carefully with the napkin. He pushed back from the table and prowled the darkening living area.

He knew that he should at least pick up the dishes and tidy up the table. By rights, he should even wash them. He had caused Carrie a lot of fuss because he had been late. But he couldn't bring himself to do it. He couldn't settle down. Safe, he still was not at peace.

There was no use in putting this business off any longer, he

realized, no use to duck the fear that was nagging at him. He knew what it was he faced, if he only would admit it.

Stuffy was crazy, of course. He could not possibly be right. He'd been thinking too much—imagining, rather.

The kids were no different now than they'd ever been.

Except that the grade averages had improved noticeably in the last ten years or so.

Except that there were, as one might expect of such grade averages, an increase in scholarships.

Except that the glitter of competitive sports was beginning to wear off.

Except that there was, in Millville, almost no delinquency.

And those solemn childish faces, with the big, bright eyes, staring up at him from the papers on his desk.

He paced slowly up and down the carpeting before the big brick fireplace, and the dead, black maw beneath the chimney throat, with the bitter smell of old wood ashes in it, seemed to be a mouth making sport of him.

He cracked one feebly clenched old fist into a shaky palm.

"It can't be right," he said fiercely to himself.

And yet, on the face of all evidence, it was.

The children in Millville were maturing faster; they were growing up, intellectually, much faster than they should.

And perhaps even more than that.

Growing in a new dimension, he wondered. Receding farther from the savage that still lingered in humanity. For sports, organized sports on whatever basis, still remained a refined product of the cave—some antagonism that Man had carried forward under many different guises and which broke forth at least partially in the open in the field of sports.

If he could only talk with the students, he thought, if he could somehow find out what they thought, then there might be a chance of running this thing to the ground.

But that was impossible. The barriers were too high and intricate, the lines of communication much too cluttered. For he was old and they were young; he was authority and they were the regimented. Once again the stratifications would keep them apart. There was no way in which he could approach them.

It was all right to say there was something happening, ridiculous as it might sound. But the important matter, if such should be the case, was to discover the cause and to plot the trend.

And Stuffy must be wrong. For it was fantastic to suggest the Sitters were engineering it.

Peculiarly enough, the Sitters, alien as they were, had established

themselves as solid citizens of Millville. They would, he was sure, do nothing to jeopardize the position they had won—the position of being accepted and generally let alone and little talked about.

They would do nothing to attract attention to themselves. Through the years, too many other aliens had gotten into trouble through attempts to meddle and by exhibitionism. Although, come to think of it, what might have seemed to be exhibitionism, from the human viewpoint, possibly had been no more than normal alien conduct.

It had been the good fortune of the Sitters that their natural mother-disposition had enabled them to fit into the human pattern. They had proven ideal baby-sitters and in this they had an economic value and were the more readily accepted.

For many years, they had taken care of the MillvilIe babies and they were everything that a sitter ought to be. And now they ran a nursery school, although, he remembered, there had been some ruckus over that, since they quite understandably did not hold formal education credits.

He turned on a light and went to the shelves to find something he could read. But there was nothing there that held any interest for him. He ran a finger along the backs of the rows of volumes and his eyes flicked down the titles, but he found absolutely nothing.

He left the shelves and paced over to the large front window and stared out at the street. The street lamps had not come on yet, but there were lights here and there in windows and occasionally a bubble-shaped car moved silently down the pavement, the fanning headlights catching a scurrying bunch of leaves or a crouching cat.

It was one of the older streets in town; at one time, he had known everyone who had lived upon it. He could call out without hesitation the names of the one-time owners—Wilson, Becket, Johnson, Random—but none of them lived here any longer. The names had changed and the faces were faces that he did not know; the stratification had shifted and he knew almost no one on the street.

The middle-young and the very old, he thought, they are the lonely ones.

He went back to the chair beside the lamp he'd lighted and sat down rather stiffly in it. He fidgeted, drumming his fingers on the arms. He wanted to get up, but there was nothing to get up for, unless it was to wash the dishes, and he didn't want to wash them.

He could take a walk, he told himself. That might be a good idea. There was a lot of comfort in an evening walk.

He got his coat and hat and went out the door and down the walk and turned west at the gate.

He was more than halfway there, skirting the business section,

before he admitted to himself that he was heading for the Stiles house and the Sitters—that he had, in fact, never intended doing otherwise.

What he might do there, what he might learn there, he had no idea. There was no actual purpose in his mind. It was almost as if he were on an unknown mission, as if he were being pushed by some unseen force into a situation of no-choice.

He came to the Stiles house and stood on the walk outside, looking at it.

It was an old house, surrounded by shade trees that had been planted many years before, and the front yard was a wilderness of shrubs. Every once in a while, someone would come and cut the lawn and maybe trim the hedges and fix up the flower beds to pay the Sitters for all the baby-minding they had done, since the Sitters took no money.

And that was a funny thing, Dean thought, their not taking any money—just as if they didn't need it, as if they might not know what to do with it even if they had any. Perhaps they didn't need it, for they bought no food and still they kept on living and never had been sick enough for anyone to know about it. There must have been times when they were cold, although no one ever mentioned it, but they bought no fuel, and Lamont Stiles had left a fund to pay the taxes—so maybe it was true that they had no need of money.

There had been a time, Dean recalled, when there had been a lot of speculation in the town about their not eating—or at least not buying any food. But after a time the speculation dwindled down and all anyone would say was that you could never figure a lot of things about alien people and there was no use in trying.

And that was right, of course.

The Stiles house, Dean realized with something of a start, was even older than his house. It was a rambler and they had been popular many years before the split-level had come in.

Heavy drapes were drawn at the windows, but there was light behind the drapes and he knew the Sitters were at home. They were usually home, of course. Except on baby-sitting jobs, they never left the house, and in recent years they had gone out but little, for people had gotten in the habit of dropping off the kids at the Sitters' house. The kids never made a fuss, not even the tiny ones. They all liked going to the Sitters.

He went up the walk and climbed the stoop to ring the bell.

He waited and heard movement in the house.

The door came open and one of the Sitters stood there, with the light behind it, and he had forgotten—it had been many years since he'd seen one of the Sitters.

Shortly after Lamont Stiles had come home, Dean remembered,

he had met all three of them, and in the years between, he had seen one of them from time to time at a distance on the street. But the memory and the wonder had faded from his mind and now it struck him once again with all the olden force—the faery grace, the sense of suddenly standing face to face with a gentle flower.

The face, if it might be called a face, was sweet—too sweet, so sweet that it had no character and hardly an individuality. A baffling skin arrangement, like the petals of a flower, rose above the face, and the body of the Sitter was slender beyond all belief and yet so full of grace and poise that one forgot the slimness. And about the entire creature hung an air of such sweet simplicity and such a scent of innocence that it blotted out all else.

No wonder, Dean found himself thinking, that the children liked them so.

"Mr. Dean," the Sitter said, "won't you please come in? We are very honored."

"Thank you," he said, taking off his hat.

He stepped inside and heard the closing of the door and then the Sitter was at his side again.

"This chair right here," it said. "We reserve this one for our special visitors."

And it was all very sweet and friendly, and yet there was an alien, frightening touch.

Somewhere there were children laughing in the house. He twisted his head around to find where the laughter came from.

"They're in the nursery," said the Sitter. "I will close the door."

Dean sank into the chair and perched his battered old soft hat on one bony knee, fondling it with his bony fingers.

The Sitter came back and sat down on the floor in front of him, sat down with a single, effortless motion and he had the distinct impression of the swirl of flaring skirts, although the Sitter wore none.

"Now," the Sitter said by way of announcing that Dean commanded its entire attention.

But he did not speak, for the laughter still was in the room. Even with the door to the nursery shut, there still was childish laughter. It came from everywhere all about the room and it was an utterly happy laughter, the gay and abandoned, the unthinking, the spontaneous laughter of children hard at play.

Nor was that all.

Childish sparkle glittered in the air and there was the long forgotten sense of timelessness—of the day that never ended, that was never meant to end. A breeze was blowing out of some never-never land and it carried with it the scent of brook water bearing on its tide flotillas of fallen autumn leaves, and there was, as well, the hint of

clover and of marigolds and the smell of fuzzy, new-washed blankets such as are used in cribs.

"Mr. Dean," the Sitter said.

He roused himself guiltily.

"I'm sorry," he told the Sitter. "I was listening to the children."

"But the door is closed."

"The children in this room," he said.

"There are no children in this room."

"Quite right," he said. "Quite right."

But there were. He could hear their laughter and the patter of their feet.

There were children, or at least the sense of them, and there was also the sense of many flowers, long since died and shriveled in actuality, but with the feel of them still caged inside the room. And the sense of beauty—the beauty of many different things, of flowers and gee-gaw jewelry and little painted pictures and of gaily colored scarves, of all the things that through the years had been given to the Sitters in lieu of money.

"This room," he said haltingly, half-confused. "It is such a pleasant room. I'd just like to sit here."

He felt himself sink into the room, into the youngness and the gayety. If he let go, he thought, if he only could let go, he might join the running and be the same as they.

"Mr. Dean," the Sitter said, "you are very sensitive."

"I am very old," said Dean. "Maybe that's the reason."

The room was both ancient and antique. It was a cry across almost two centuries, with its small brick fireplace paneled in white wood, its arched doorways and the windows that stretched from floor to ceiling, covered by heavy drapes of black and green, etched with golden thread. And it had a solid comfort and a deep security that the present architecture of aluminum and glass never could achieve. It was dusty and moldy and cluttered and perhaps unsanitary, but it had the feel of home.

"I am old-fashioned," said Dean, "and, I suspect, very close to senile, and I am afraid that the time has come again to believe in fairy tales and magic."

"It is not magic," the Sitter replied. "It is the way we live, the only way we can live. You will agree that even Sitters must somehow stay alive."

"Yes, I agree," said Dean.

He lifted the battered hat from off his knee and rose slowly to his feet.

The laughter seemed to be fainter now and the patter not so loud. But the sense of youth—of youngness, of vitality and of happiness—

still lay within the room. It lent a sheen to the ancient shabbiness and it made his heart begin to ache with a sudden gladness.

The Sitter still sat upon the floor. “There was something you wanted, Mr. Dean?”

Dean fumbled with his hat. “Not any more. I think I’ve found my answer.”

And even as he said it, he knew it was unbelievable, that once he stood outside the door, he’d know with certainty there could be no truth in what he’d found.

The Sitter rose. “You will come again? We would love to have you.”

“Perhaps,” said Dean, and turned toward the door.

Suddenly there was a top spinning on the floor, a golden top with flashing jewels set in it that caught the light and scattered it in a million flashing colors, and as it spun, it played a whistling tune—the kind of music that got inside and melted down one’s soul.

Dean felt himself let go—as, sitting in the chair, he had thought it was impossible for him to do. And the laughter came again and the world outside withdrew and the room suddenly was filled with the marvelous light of Christmas.

He took a quick step forward and he dropped his hat. He didn’t know his name, nor where he was, nor how he might have come there, and he didn’t care. He felt a gurgling happiness welling up in him and he stooped to reach out for the top.

He missed it by an inch or two and he shuffled forward, stooping, reaching, and his toe caught in a hole in the ancient carpeting and he crashed down on his knees.

The top was gone and the Christmas light snapped out and the world rushed in upon him. The gurgling happiness had gone and he was an old man in a beauty-haunted house, struggling from his knees to face an alien creature.

“I am sorry,” said the Sitter. “You almost had it. Perhaps some other time.”

He shook his head. “No! Not another time!”

The Sitter answered kindly, “It’s the best we have to offer.”

Dean fumbled his hat back on his head and turned shakily to the door. The Sitter opened it and he staggered out.

“Come again,” the Sitter said, most sweetly. “Any time you wish.”

On the street outside, Dean stopped and leaned against a tree. He took off his hat and mopped his brow.

Now, where he had felt only shock before, the horror began creeping in—the horror of a kind of life that did not eat as human beings ate, but in another way, who sucked their nourishment from beauty and from youth, who drained a bouquet dry and who nibbled

from the happy hours of a laughing child, and even munched the laughter.

It was no wonder that the children of this village matured beyond their years. For they had their childishness stripped from them by a hungry form of life that looked on them as fodder. There might be, he thought, only so much of happy running and of childish laughter dealt out to any human. And while some might not use their quota, there still might be a limit on it, and once one had used it all, then it was gone and a person became an adult without too much of wonder or of laughter left within him.

The Sitters took no money. There was no reason that they should, for they had no need of it. Their house was filled with all the provender they had stowed away for years.

And in all those years, he was the first to know, the first to sense the nature of those aliens brought home by Lamont Stiles. It was a sobering thought--that he should be the first to find it out. He had said that he was old and that might be the reason. But that had been no more than words, rising to his lips almost automatically as a part of his professional self-pity. Yet there might be something in it even so.

Could it be possible that, for the old, there might be certain compensations for the loss of other faculties? As the body slowed and the mind began to dim, might some magical ability, a sort of psychic bloodhound sense, rise out of the embers of a life that was nearly spent?

He was always pothering around about how old he was, he told himself, as if the mere fact of getting old might be a virtue. He was forgetful of the present and his preoccupation with the past was growing to the danger point. He was close to second childhood and he was the one who knew it—and might that be the answer? Might that be why he'd seen the top and known the Christmas lights?

He wondered what might have happened if he could have grabbed the top.

He put his hat back on and stepped out from the tree and went slowly up the walk, heading back for home.

What could he do about it, he wondered, now that he'd unearthed the Sitters' secret? He could run and tattle, surely, but there'd be no one to believe him. They would listen to him and they would be polite so as not to hurt his feelings, yet there was no one in the village but would take it for an old man's imaginings, and there'd be nothing that he could do about it. For beyond his own sure knowledge, he had not a shred of proof.

He might call attention to the maturity of the young people, as Stuffy had called his attention to it this very afternoon. But even there he would find no proof, for in the final reckoning, all the villagers

would retreat to rationalization. Parental pride, if nothing else, might require they should. Not a single one of them would find much cause for wonder in the fact that a boy or girl of theirs was singularly well-mannered and above the average in intelligence.

One might say that the parents should have noticed, that they should have known that an entire village full of children could not possibly be so well-behaved or so level-headed or so anything else as were these Millville children. And yet they had not noticed. It had crept along so slowly, had insinuated itself so smoothly, that the change was not apparent.

For that matter, he himself had not noticed it, he who most of his life had been intimately associated with these very children in which he found so much wonder now. And if he had not noticed, then why expect that someone else should? It had remained for a gossipy old busybody like the janitor to put a finger on it.

His throat was dry and his belly weak and sick and what he needed most of all, Dean told himself, was a cup of coffee.

He turned off on a street that would take him to the downtown section and he plodded along with his head bent against the dark.

What would be the end of it, he asked himself. What would be the gain for this lost childhood? For this pilfering of children? What the value that growing boys and girls should cease to play a little sooner, that they take up the attitude of adults before the chosen time?

There was some gain already seen. The children of Millville were obedient and polite; they were constructive in their play; they'd ceased to be little savages or snobs.

The trouble was, now that one thought of it, they'd almost ceased being children, too.

And in the days to come? Would Millville supply Earth with great statesmen, with canny diplomats, with topnotch educators and able scientists? Perhaps, but that was not the point at all. The question of robbing childhood of its heritage to achieve these qualities was the basic question.

Dean came into the business district, not quite three blocks long, and walked slowly down the street, heading for the only drugstore in the town.

There were only a few people in the store and he walked over to the lunch counter and sat down. He perched on the stool forlornly, with the battered hat pulled down above his eyes, and he gripped the counter's edge to keep his hands from shaking.

"Coffee," he said to the girl who came to take his order, and she brought it to him.

He sipped at it, for it was too hot to drink. He was sorry he had come.

He felt all alone and strange, with all the bright light and the chrome, as if he were something that had shuffled from the past into a place reserved for the present.

He almost never came downtown any more and that must be the reason for the way he felt. Especially he almost never came down in the evening, although there had been a time he had.

He smiled, remembering how the old crowd used to get together and talk around in circles, about inconsequential things, their talk not getting anywhere and never meaning to.

But that was all ended now. The crowd had disappeared. Some of them were dead and some had moved away and the few of them still left seldom ventured out.

He sat there, thinking, knowing he was maudlin and not caring if he was, too tired and shaken to flinch away from it.

A hand fell on his shoulder and he swung around, surprised.

Young Bob Martin stood there, and although he smiled, he still had the look of someone who had done a thing that he was unsure of.

"Sir, there are some of us down here at a table," said young Martin, gulping a little at his own boldness.

Dean nodded. "That's very nice," he mumbled.

"We wondered if maybe—that is, Mr. Dean, we'd be pleased if you would care to join us."

"Well, that is very nice of you, indeed."

"We didn't mean, sir—that is—"

"Why, certainly," said Dean. "I'd be very glad to."

"Here, sir, let me take your coffee. I won't spill a drop of it."

"I'll trust you, Bob," said Dean, getting to his feet. "You almost never fumble."

"I can explain that, Mr. Dean. It's not that I don't want to play. It's just that …"

Dean tapped him on the shoulder lightly. "I understand. There is no need to explain."

He paused a second, trying to decide if it were wise to say what was in his mind.

He decided to: "If you don't tell the coach, I might even say I agree with you. There comes a time in life when football begins to seem a little silly."

Martin grinned, relieved. "You've hit it on the head. Exactly."

He led the way to the table.

There were four of them—Ronald King, George Woods, Judy Charleson, and Donna Thompson. All good kids, thought Dean, every one of them. He saw they had been dawdling away at sodas, making them stretch out as long as possible.

They all looked up at him and smiled, and George Woods pulled

back a chair in invitation. Dean sat down carefully and placed his hat on the floor beside him. Bob set down the coffee.

"It was good of you to think of me," said Dean and wondered why he found himself embarrassed. After all, these were his kids—the kids he saw every day in school, the ones he pushed and coddled into an education, the kids he'd never had himself.

"You're just the man we need," said Ronald King. "We've been talking about Lamont Stiles. He is the only Millville man who ever went to space and …"

"You must have known him, Mr. Dean," said Judy.

"Yes," Dean said slowly, "I did know him, but not as well as Stuffy did. Stuffy and he were kids together. I was a little older."

"What kind of man is he?" asked Donna.

Dean chuckled. "Lamont Stiles? He was the town's delinquent. He was poor in school and he had no home life and he just mostly ran wild. If there was trouble, you could bet your life that Lamont had had a hand in it. Everyone said that Lamont never would amount to anything and when it had been said often enough and long enough, Lamont must have taken it to heart …"

He talked on and on, and they asked him questions, and Ronald King went to the counter and came back with another cup of coffee for him.

The talk switched from Stiles to football. King and Martin told him what they had told the coach. Then the talk went on to problems in student government and from that to the new theories in ionic drive, announced just recently.

Dean did not do all the talking; he did a lot of listening, too, and he asked questions of his own and time flowed on unnoticed.

Suddenly the lights blinked and Dean looked up, startled.

Judy laughed at him. "That means the place is closing. It's the signal that we have to leave."

"I see," said Dean. "Do you folks do this often—staying until closing time, I mean?"

"Not often," Bob Martin told him. "On weekdays, there is too much studying."

"I remember many years ago—" Dean began, then left the words hanging in the air.

Yes, indeed, he thought, many years ago. And again tonight!

He looked at them, the five faces around the table. Courtesy, he thought, and kindness and respect. But something more than that.

Talking with them, he had forgotten he was old. They had accepted him as another human being, not as an aged human being, not as a symbol of authority. They had moved over for him and made him one of them and themselves one of him; they had broken down

the barrier not only of pupil and teacher, but of age and youth as well.

"I have my car," Bob Martin said. "Can I drive you home?"

Dean picked his hat from off the floor and rose slowly to his feet.

"No, thanks," he said. "I think I'd like to walk. I have an idea or two I'd like to mull a bit. Walking helps one think."

"Come again," said Judy Charleson. "Some other Friday night, perhaps."

"Why, thanks," said Dean. "I do believe I will."

Great kids, he told himself with a certain pride. Full of a kindness and a courtesy beyond even normal adult courtesy and kindness. Not brash, not condescending, not like kids at all, and yet with the shine of youthfulness and the idealism and ambition that walked hand in hand with youth.

Premature adults, lacking cynicism. And that was an important thing, the lack of cynicism.

Surely there could be nothing wrong in a humanity like that. Perhaps this was the very coin in which the Sitters paid for the childhood they had stolen.

If they had stolen it. For they might not have stolen it; they might merely have captured it and stored it.

And in such a case, then they had given free this new maturity and this new equality. And they had taken something which would have been lost in any event—something for which the human race had no use at all, but which was the stuff of life for the Sitter people.

They had taken youth and beauty and they had stored it in the house; they had preserved something that a human could not preserve except in memory. They had caught a fleeting thing and held it and it was there—the harvest of many years; the house was bulging with it.

Lamont Stiles, he wondered, talking in his mind to that man so long ago, so far away, how much did you know? What purpose was in your mind?

Perhaps a rebuke to the smugness of the town that had driven him to greatness. Perhaps a hope, maybe a certainty, that no one in Millville could ever say again, as they had said of Lamont Stiles, that this or that boy or girl would amount to nothing.

That much, perhaps, but surely not any more than that.

Donna had put her hand upon his arm, was tugging at his sleeve.

"Come on, Mr. Dean," she urged. "You can't stay standing here."

They walked with him to the door and said good night and he went up the street at a little faster gait, it seemed to him, than he ordinarily traveled.

But that, he told himself quite seriously, was because now he was just slightly younger than he had been a couple of hours before.

Dean went on even faster and he didn't hobble and he wasn't

tired at all, but he wouldn't admit it to himself—for it was a dream, a hope, a seeking after that one never must admit. Until one said it aloud, there was no commitment to the hope, but once the word was spoken, then bitter disappointment lurked behind a tree.

He was walking in the wrong direction. He should be heading back for home. It was getting late and he should be in bed.

And he mustn't speak the word. He must not breathe the thought.

He went up the walk, past the shrub-choked lawn, and he saw that the light still filtered through the drawn drapes.

He stopped on the stoop and the thought flashed through his mind: *There are Stuffy and myself and old Abe Hawkins. There are a lot of us …*

The door came open and the Sitter stood there, poised and beautiful and not the least surprised. It was, he thought, almost as if it had been expecting him.

And the other two of them, he saw, were sitting by the fireplace.

"Won't you please come in?" the Sitter said. "We are so glad you decided to come back. The children all are gone. We can have a cozy chat."

He came in and sat down in the chair again and perched the hat carefully on one knee.

Once again the children were running in the room and there was the sense of timelessness and the sound of laughter.

He sat and nodded, thinking, while the Sitters waited.

It was hard, he thought. Hard to make the words come right.

He felt again as he had felt many years ago, when the teacher had called upon him to recite in the second grade.

They were waiting, but they were patient; they would give him time.

He had to say it right. He must make them understand. He couldn't blurt it out. It must be made to sound natural, and logical as well.

And how, he asked himself, could he make it logical?

There was nothing logical at all in men as old as he and Stuffy needing baby-sitters.

Tools

"Tools," which was originally published in the July 1942 issue of Astounding Science Fiction*, and for which Clifford D. Simak was paid one hundred dollars, might have been awarded a Hugo or a Nebula if those awards had been around at the time. On the one hand, it represents one of the first of Cliff Simak's many portrayals of non-human intelligence—a nuanced portrayal that succeeded in showing alien intelligence as both different from human concepts of intelligence and benign (at least at times). This is in keeping with an idea that Cliff would touch on in his* City *stories, written just a short time later: the notion that there may be intelligences so handicapped by their physical situations that they cannot communicate, and thus cannot learn and grow without help.*

But the other major theme of this story, for which recognition is due, is its somewhat predictive portrayal of a solar system in which human beings are virtually enslaved by big business interests—in particular, the energy industry of the time —and their addiction to what energy gives them.

—dww

Venus had broken many men. Now it was breaking Harvey Boone, and the worst of it was that Boone knew it was breaking him and couldn't do a thing about it.

Although it wasn't entirely Venus. Partly it was Archie—Archie, the thing in the talking jar. Perhaps it wasn't right calling Archie just a "thing." Archie might have been an "it" or "they." No one knew. In fact, no one knew much of anything about Archie despite the fact men had talked to him and studied him for almost a hundred years.

Harvey Boone was official observer for the Solar Institute, and his reports, sent back with every rocketload of radium that streaked out to Earth, were adding to the voluminous mass of data assembled on Archie. Data that told almost nothing at all.

Venus itself was bad enough. Men died when a suit cracked or radium shields broke down. Although that wasn't the usual way the planet killed. Venus had a better—perhaps, more accurately—a worse way.

Any alien planet is hard to live on and stay sane. Strangeness is a word that doesn't have much meaning until a man stands face to face with it and then it smacks him straight between the eyes.

Venus was alien—plus. One always had a sense that eyes were

watching him, watching all the time. And waiting. Although one didn't have the least idea what they were waiting for.

On Venus, something always stalked a man—something that trod just on the outer edge of shadow. A sense of not belonging, of being out of place, of being an intruder. A baffling psychological something that drove men to their deaths or to living deaths that were even worse.

Harvey Boone huddled on a chair in one corner of the laboratory, nursing a whiskey bottle, while Archie chuckled at him.

"Nerves," said Archie. "Your nerves are shot to hell."

Boone's hand shook as he tilted the whiskey bottle up. His hate-filled eyes glared at the lead-glass jar even as he gulped.

Boone knew what Archie said was true. Even through his drink-fogged brain, the one fact stood out in bright relief—he was going crazy. He had seen Johnny Garrison, commander of the dome, watching him. And Doc Steele. Doc was the psychologist, and when Doc started watching one it was time to pull up and try to straighten oneself out. For Doc's word was law. It had to be law.

A knock sounded on the door and Boone called out an invitation. Doc Steele strode in.

"Good morning, Boone," he said. "Hello, Archie."

Archie's voice, mechanical and toneless, returned the greeting.

"Have a drink," said Boone.

Doc shook his head, took a cigar from his pocket and with a knife cut it neatly in two. One half he stuck back in his pocket, the other half in his mouth.

"Don't you ever light those things?" demanded Boone irritably.

"Nope," Doc replied cheerfully. "Always dry-smoke them."

He said to Archie: "How are you today, Archie?"

Despite its mechanical whir, Archie's reply sounded almost querulous: "Why do you always ask me that, doctor? You know there's nothing wrong with me. There never could be. I'm always all right."

Doc chuckled. "I seem to keep forgetting about you. Wish the human race was like that. Then there wouldn't be any need for chaps like me."

"I'm glad you came," Archie grated. "I like to talk to you. You never make me feel you're trying to find out something."

"He says that to get my goat," snapped Boone.

"I wouldn't let him do it," Doc declared. To Archie he said: "I suppose it does get tiresome after a hundred years or so. But it doesn't seem to have done much good. No one seems to have found out much about you."

He swiveled the cigar across his face. "Maybe they tried too hard."

"That," said Archie, "might be true. You remind me of Masterson. You're different from the ones who come out to watch me now."

"You don't like them?" Doc winked at Boone and Boone glowered back.

"Why should I like them?" asked Archie. "They regard me as a freak, a curiosity, something to be observed, an assignment to be done. Masterson thought of me as life, as a fellow entity. And so do you."

"Why, bless my soul," said Doc, "and so I do."

"You don't catch me pitying you," Doc declared. "Sometimes I catch myself wishing I were you. I suspect I might enjoy your kind of philosophy."

"The human race," protested Archie, "couldn't understand my philosophy. I doubt if I could explain it to them. The language doesn't have the words. Just as I had a hard time understanding a lot of your Terrestrial philosophy and economics. I've studied your history and your economics and your political science. I've kept up with your current events. And sometimes, many times, it doesn't make sense to me. Sometimes I think it's stupid, but I try to tell myself that it may be because I don't understand. I miss something, perhaps. Some vital quirk of mind, some underlying factor."

Doc sobered. "I don't think you miss much, Archie. A lot of the things we do are stupid, even by our own standards. We lack foresight so often."

Doc lifted his eyes to the large oil portrait that hung on the wall above Boone's desk, and he had quite forgotten Boone. From the portrait, kindly gray eyes smiled out of the face. The brows were furrowed, the wavy white hair looked like a silver crown.

"We need more men like him," said Doc. "More men with vision."

The portrait was of Masterson, the man who had discovered intelligent life existing in the great clouds of radon that hung over the vast beds of radium ore. Masterson had been more than a man of vision. He had been a genius and a glutton for work.

From the moment he had discerned, by accident, what he thought were lifelike properties in some radon he was studying, he had labored unceasingly with but one end in view. In this very laboratory he had carried out his life work, and there, in the lead-glass jar on the table, lay the end product—Archie.

Masterson had confined radon under pressure in a shielded jar equipped with a delicate system of controls. Failing time after time, never admitting defeat, he had taught the radon in the jar to recognize certain electrical impulses set up within the jar. And the radon, recognizing these impulses as intelligent symbols, finally had learned to manipulate the controls which produced the voice by which it

spoke.

It had not been as easy as it sounded, however. It took many grueling years. For both Masterson and Archie were groping in the dark, working without comparable experience, without even a comparable understanding or a comparable mode of thinking. Two alien minds—

"Does it seem a long time, Archie?" Doc asked.

"That's hard to say," the speaker boomed. "Time doesn't have a great deal of meaning to something that goes on and on."

"You mean you are immortal?"

"No, perhaps not immortal."

"But do you know?" snapped Doc.

Archie did, then, the thing which had driven observer after observer close to madness. He simply didn't answer.

Silence thrummed in the room. Doc heard the click of sliding doors elsewhere in the dome, the low hum of powerful machinery.

"That's the way he is," yelled Boone. "That's the way he always is. Shuts up like a clam. Sometimes I'd like to—"

"Break it up, Archie," commanded Doc. "You don't have to play dead with me. I'm not here to question you. I'm just here to pass the time of day. Is there anything I can do for you?"

"You might bring in the latest newspapers and read to me," said Archie.

"That," declared Doc, "would be a downright privilege."

"But not the funnies," cautioned Archie. "Somehow I can't appreciate the funnies."

Outside the dome, the week-long night had fallen and it was snowing again—great, white sheets driven by gusty blasts of wind. Not real snow, but paraformaldehyde, solidified formaldehyde. For that was the stuff of which the mighty cloud banks which forever shielded the planet from space was composed.

Harvey Boone, clad in space gear, stood on the barren ridge above the dome and looked down at the scene spread before his eyes.

There lay the dome, with the flicker of shadows playing over it as the great batteries of lamps set in the radium pits swung to and fro.

In the pits labored mighty machines—specialized machines operating with "radon brains," using, in simplified form, the same principles of control as were used to communicate with Archie. Brains that could receive and understand orders, execute them through the medium of the machinery which they controlled—but which, unlike Archie, did not hold human knowledge accumulated over the course of a hundred years.

Here and there were men. Men incased in shining crystal armor to protect them against the hell's brew that was Venus' atmosphere.

Carbon dioxide and not a trace of oxygen. Once there had been plenty of free oxygen, some water vapor. But the oxygen had gone to form carbon dioxide and formaldehyde, and the water vapor had combined to solidify the formaldehyde.

Harvey Boone shivered as a blast of hot wind swirled a blanket of solidified formaldehyde around him, shutting off the view. For a moment he stood isolated in a world of swirling white and through the whiteness something seemed to stalk him. Something that might have been fear, and yet more stark than fear, more subtle than panic, more agonizing than terror.

Boone was on the verge of cringing horror before the wind whipped the cloud of snow away. The gale hooted and howled at him. The dancing snow made ghostly patterns in the air. The banks of lights in the pits below weaved fantastically against the sweeping, wind-driven clouds of white.

Unaccountable panic gripped him tight. Mocking whispers danced along the wind. The rising wind shrieked malignantly and a burst of snow swished at him.

Harvey Boone screamed and ran, unseen terror trotting at his heels.

But the closing lock did not shut out the horror of the outdoors. It wasn't something one could get rid of as easily as that.

Stripped of space gear, he found his hands were shaking.

"I need a drink," he told himself.

In the laboratory he took the bottle out of his desk, tilted it.

A mocking laugh sounded behind him. Nerves on edge, he whirled about.

A face was leering at him from the glass jar on the table. And that was wrong. For there wasn't any face. There wasn't anything one could see inside the jar. Nothing but Archie—radon under pressure. One doesn't see radon—not unless one looks at it through a spectroscope.

Boone passed his hand swiftly before his eyes and looked again. The face was gone.

Archie chortled at him. "I'm getting you. I almost got you then. You'll crack up pretty soon. What are you waiting for? Why are you hanging on? In the end I'll get you!"

Boone strangled with rage.

"You're wrong," he mouthed. "I'm the one that's got you." He slapped a pile of notes that lay on his desk. "I'm the one who's going to crack you. I'll bust you wide open. I'll let them know what you really are."

"Oh, yeah!" crowed Archie.

Boone set down the bottle. "Damn you," he said thickly. "I have

half a notion to settle you once and for all. You've deviled me long enough. I'm going to let you die."

"You'll do what?" demanded Archie.

"I'll let you die," stormed Boone. "All I have to do is forget to pump more radon in. In another week you'll be polonium and—"

"You wouldn't dare," taunted Archie. "You know what would happen to you then. The Institute would have your scalp for that."

The face was in the jar again. A terrible face. One that sent fear and loathing and terrifying anger surging through the scientist.

With a shriek of rage, Boone grabbed the bottle off the desk and hurled it. It missed Archie, shattered against the wall, spraying the glass jar with liquor.

Archie tittered and a hand materialized before the face, waggling its fingers in an obscene gesture.

With a hoarse whoop, Boone leaped forward and snatched up a heavy stool. Archie's laughter rang through the room—terrible laughter.

Boone screamed in insane rage and babbled. The stool came up and smashed downward. The jar splintered under the crashing impact.

Searing radiations lanced through the room. The spectrographic detectors flamed faintly. Fans whined, rose to a piercing shriek, sweeping the air, throwing the radon outside the dome. Atmosphere hissed and roared.

But Harvey Boone knew none of this, for Harvey Boone was dead. Incredible pain had lashed at him in one searing second and he had dropped, his face and hands burned to a fiery red, his eyes mere staring holes.

Radon, in its pure state, weight for weight, is one hundred thousand times as active as radium.

"But Archie couldn't have had anything to do with it," protested Johnny Garrison. "Hypnotism! That's incredible. He couldn't hypnotize a person. There's nothing to support such a belief. We've observed Archie for a hundred years—"

"Let's not forget one thing," interrupted Doc. "In Archie we were observing something that was intelligent. Just how intelligent we had no way of knowing. But we do know this: His intelligence was not human intelligence. It couldn't be. True, we bridged the gap, we talked with him. But the talk was carried on in human terms, upon a human basis."

Doc's cigar traveled from east to west. "Does that suggest anything to you?"

The dome commander's face was white. "I'd never thought of that. But it means—it would have to mean—that Archie was intelligent enough to force his thought processes into human

channels."

Doc nodded. "Could man have done the same? Could man have forced himself to think the way Archie thinks? I doubt it. Archie's thought processes probably would be too alien for us to even grasp. What is more, Archie recognized this. It all boils down to this: We furnished the mechanical set-up, Archie furnished the mental set-up."

"You make it sound frightening," said Garrison.

"It is frightening," Doc assured him.

Garrison stood up. "There's no use beating around the bush. Both of us are thinking the same thing."

Doc said: "I'm afraid so. There's nothing else to think."

"All of them know," said Garrison, "all of them, or it, or whatever is out there—they know as much as Archie knew."

"I'm sure they do," Doc agreed. "Archie never lost his identity, even though we had to pump in new radon every few days. It was always the same Archie. Tests with the radon brains on the machines, however, revealed merely an intelligence very poorly versed in human knowledge. The same radon, mind you, and yet the radon that was used to replenish Archie becomes Archie, while all the other radon remained an intelligence that had none of Archie's human knowledge."

"And now," said Garrison, "it's all Archie. I told Mac he'd have to shut down the machines when the radon ran low in the brains. We simply can't take a chance. There'll be hell to pay. R.C. will blast space wide open. We're behind schedule now—"

He stared out the port with haggard face, watching the snow sweep by.

"Take it easy, Johnny," counseled Doc. "The home office has been riding you again. You're behind schedule and you're getting jumpy. You're remembering some of the things you've seen happen to men who couldn't keep the wheels of industry moving and the banners of Radium, Inc., waving high. You're thinking of R.C.'s secret police and charges of sabotage and God knows what."

"Look, Doc," said Garrison desperately, almost pleadingly, "this is my big chance—my last chance. I'm not too young any more, and this chance has to click. Make good here on Venus and I'm set for life. No more third-rate wilderness posts out on the Jovian moons, no more stinking tricks on the Martian desert. It'll be Earth for me—Earth and an easy-chair."

"I know how it is," said Doc. "It's the old system of fear. You're afraid of the big boys and Mac is afraid of you and the men are afraid of Mac. And all of us are afraid of Venus. Radium, Inc., owns the Solar System, body and soul. The radium monopoly, holding companies, interlocking directories—it all adds up to invisible government, not

too invisible at that. R.C. Webster owns us all. He owns us by virtue of Streeter's secret police and his spies. He owns us because radium is power and he owns the radium. He owns us because there isn't a government that won't jump when he snaps his fingers. His father and grandfather owned us before this, and his son and grandson will own us after a while."

He chuckled. "You needn't look so horrified, Johnny. You're the only one that's hearing me, and you won't say a word. But you know it's the truth as well as I. Radium is the basis of the power that holds the Solar System in thrall. The wheels of the System depend on radium from Venus. It was the price the people of Earth had to pay for solar expansion, for a solar empire. Just the cost of wheeling a ship from one planet to another is tremendous. It takes capital to develop a solar empire, and when capital is called on it always has a price. We paid that price, and this is what we got."

Garrison reached out with trembling hands to pick up a bottle of brandy. The liquor splashed as he poured it in a tumbler.

"What are we going to do, Doc?"

"I wish I knew," said Doc.

A bell jangled and Garrison lifted the phone.

The voice of the chief engineer shouted at him.

"Chief, we have to fill those brains again. Either that or shut down. The radon is running low."

"I thought I told you to shut them down," yelled Garrison. "We can't take a chance. We can't turn those machines over to Archie."

Mac howled in anguish. "But we're way behind schedule. Shut them down and—"

"Shut them down!" roared Garrison. "Sparks is trying to get through to Earth. I'll let you know."

He hung the speaker back in its cradle, lifted it again and dialed the communications room.

"How's the call to Earth coming?"

"I'm trying," yelped Sparks, "but I'm afraid. We're nearing the Sun, you know. Space is all chopped. … Hey, wait a minute. Here we are. I'll tie you in—"

Static crackled and snapped. A thin voice was shouting.

"That you, Garrison? Hello, Garrison!"

Garrison recognized the voice, distorted as it was, and grimaced. He could envision R.C. Webster, president of Radium, Inc., bouncing up and down in his chair, furious at the prospect of more trouble on Venus.

"Yes, R.C., this is Garrison."

"Well," piped R.C., "what's the trouble now? Speak up, man, what's gone wrong this time?"

Swiftly Garrison told him. Twice static blotted out the tight beam and Sparks worked like a demon to re-establish contact.

"And what are you afraid of?" shrieked the man on Earth.

"Simply this," explained Garrison, wishing it didn't sound so silly. "Archie has escaped. That means all the radon knows as much as he did. If we pump new radon into the brains, we'll be pumping in intelligent radon—that is, radon that knows about us—that is—"

"Poppycock," yelled R.C. "That's the biggest lot of damn foolishness I've ever heard."

"But, R.C.—"

"Look here, young man," fumed the voice, "we're behind schedule, aren't we? You're out there to dig radium, aren't you?"

"Yes," admitted Garrison, hopelessly.

"All right, then, dig radium. Get back on schedule. Fill up those brains and tear into it—"

"But you don't understand—"

"I said to fill up those brains and get to work. And keep working!"

"Those are orders?" asked Garrison.

"Those are orders!" snapped R.C.

Static howled at them derisively.

Garrison watched the ship roar away from the surface, lose itself in the driving whiteness of solidified formaldehyde. Beside him, Mac rubbed armored hands together in exultation.

"That almost puts us on schedule," he announced.

Garrison nodded, staring moodily out over the field. It was night again, and little wind devils of formaldehyde danced and jigged across the ground. Night and a snowstorm, and the mercury at one hundred forty degrees above Fahrenheit. During the week-long day it got hotter.

He heard the clicking of the mighty brain-controlled machines as they dug ore in the pits, the whine of wind around the dome and in the jagged hills, the snicking of the refrigerator units in his suit.

"How soon will you have Archie's jar done, Mac?" he asked. "The new Institute observer is getting anxious to see what he can get out of him."

"Just a few hours more," said Mac. "It took us a long time to figure out some of the things about it, but I've had the robots on it steady."

"Rush it over soon as you get it done. We've tried to talk to some of the radon brains in the machines, but it's no dice."

"There's just one thing bothers me," said Mac.

"What is that?" Garrison asked sharply.

"Well, we didn't figure out exactly all the angles on that jar. Some of the working parts are mighty complicated and delicate, you know.

But we thought we'd get started at least and let the Institute stooge take over when he got here. But when those robots—"

"Yes?" said Garrison.

"When the robots got to the things we couldn't understand, they tossed the blueprints to one side and went right ahead. So help me, they didn't even fumble."

The two men looked at one another, faces stolid.

"I don't like it," Mac declared.

"Neither do I," said Garrison.

He turned and walked slowly toward the dome, while Mac went back to the pits.

In Garrison's office, Doc had cornered Roger Chester, the new Institute observer.

"The Institute has mountains of reports," Chester was saying. "I tried to go through them before I came out. Night and day almost. Ever since I knew I was going to replace Boone."

Doc carefully halved a new cigar, tucked one piece in his pocket, the other in his mouth.

"What were you looking for?" he asked.

"A clue. You see, I knew Boone. For years. He wasn't the kind of fellow who would break. It would have taken more than Venus. But I didn't find a thing."

"Boone himself might have furnished that clue," Doc suggested quietly. "Did you look through his reports?"

"I read them over and over," Chester admitted. "There was nothing there. Some of his reports were missing. The last few days—"

"Those last few days can be canceled out," said Doc. "The lad wasn't himself. I wouldn't be surprised he didn't write any report those last few days."

Chester said: "That would have been unlike him."

Doc wrangled the cigar viciously. "Find anything else?"

"Not much. Not much more than Masterson knew. Even now—after all these years, it's hard to believe—that radon could be alive."

"If any gas could live," said Doc, "it would be radon. It's heavy. Molecular weight of 222. One hundred eleven times as heavy as hydrogen, five times as heavy as carbon dioxide. Not complicated from a molecular standpoint, but atomically one of the most complicated known. Complicated enough for life. And if you're looking for the unbalance necessary for life, it's radioactive. Chemically inert, perhaps, but terrifically unstable physically—"

The door of the office opened and Garrison walked in.

"Still chewing the fat about Archie?" he asked.

He strode to his desk and took out a bottle and glasses.

"It's been two weeks since Archie got away," he said. "And

nothing's happened. We're sitting on top of a volcano, waiting for it to go sky high. And nothing happens. What is Archie doing? What is he waiting for?"

"That's a big order, Garrison," declared Chester. "Let us try to envision a life which had no tools because it couldn't make them, would be useless to it even if it did have them because it couldn't use them. Man's rise, you must remember, is largely, if not entirely, attributable to his use of tools. An accident that made his thumb opposing gave him a running start—"

The phone on the desk blared. Garrison snatched it up, and Mac's voice shrieked at him.

"Chief, those damn robots are running away! So are the machines in the pit—"

Cold fingers seemed to clamp around the commander's throat.

Mac's voice was almost sobbing. "—hell for leather out here. But they left Archie's jar. Must have forgotten that."

"Mac," yelled Garrison, "jump into a tractor and try to follow them. Find out where they're going."

"But, chief—"

"Follow them!" shouted Garrison.

He slammed down the hand piece, lifted it and dialed.

"Sparks, get hold of Earth!"

"No soap," said Sparks laconically.

"Damn it, try to get them. It's a matter of life and death!"

"I can't," wailed Sparks. "We're around the Sun. We can't get through."

"Get the ship, then."

"It won't do any good," yelped Sparks. "They're hugging the Sun to cut down distance. It'll be days before they can relay a message."

"O.K.," said Garrison wearily. "Forget it."

He hung up and faced Chester.

"You don't have to imagine Archie without tools any longer," he said. "He has them now. He just stole them from us."

Mac dragged in hours later.

"I didn't find a thing," he reported. "Not a single thing."

Garrison studied him, red-eyed from worry. "That's all right, Mac. I didn't think you would. Five miles from here and you're on unknown ground."

"What are we going to do now, chief?"

Garrison shook his head. "I don't know. Sparks finally got a message through. Managed to pick up Mercury, just coming around the Sun. Probably they'll shoot it out to Mars to be relayed to Earth."

Chester came out of the laboratory and sat down.

Doc swiveled his cigar.

"What has Archie to say?" he asked.

Chester's face grew red. "I pumped the radon into the jar. But there was no response. Practically none, that is. Told me to go to hell."

Doc chuckled at the man's discomfiture. "Don't let Archie get you down. That's what he did to Boone. Got on his nerves. Drove him insane. Archie had to get out some way, you see. He couldn't do anything while he was shut up in one place. So he forced Boone to let him out. Boone didn't know what was going on, but Archie did—"

"But what is Archie doing now?" exploded Garrison.

"He's playing a game of nerves," said Doc. "He's softening us up. We'll be ready to meet his terms when he's ready to make them."

"But why terms? What could Archie want?"

Doc's cigar swished back and forth. "How should I know? We might not even recognize what Archie is fighting for—and, again, we might. He might be fighting for his existence. His life depends upon those radium beds. No more radium, no more radon, no more Archie."

"Nonsense," Chester broke in. "We could have dug those beds for a million years and not made a dent in them."

"A million years," objected Doc, "might be only a minute or two for Archie."

"Damn you, Doc," snapped Garrison, "what are you grinning for? What is so funny about it?"

"It's amusing," Doc explained. "Something I've often wondered about—just what Earthmen would do it they ran up against something that had them licked forty ways from Sunday."

"But he hasn't got us licked," yelled Mac. "Not yet."

"Anything that can keep radium from Earth can lick us," Doc declared. "And Archie can do that—don't you ever kid yourself."

"But he'll ruin the Solar System," shouted Garrison. "Machines will have to shut down. Mines and factories will be idle. Spaceships will stop running. Planets will have to be evacuated—"

"What you mean," Doc pointed out, "is that he'll ruin Radium, Inc. Not the Solar System. The System can get along without Radium, Inc. Probably even without radium. It did for thousands of years, you know. The only trouble now is that the System is keyed to radium. If there isn't any radium, it means the economic framework that was built on radium must be swept away or some substitute must be found. And if no substitute is found, we must start over again and find some other way of life—perhaps a better way—"

Chester leaped to his feet.

"That's treason!" he shouted.

Silence struck the room like a thunderclap. Three pairs of eyes staying at the standing man. The air seemed to crackle with an electric

aliveness.

"Sit down," Doc snapped.

Chester sank slowly into his chair. Mac's hands opened and closed, as if he kneaded someone's throat.

Doc nodded. "One of R.C.'s agents. He didn't smell quite like an Institute man to me. He said it was hard to believe radon could be alive. With an Institute man that wouldn't be belief, it would be knowledge."

"A dirty, snooping stooge," said Mac. "Sent out to see what was wrong on Venus."

"But not too good a one," Doc observed. "He lets his enthusiasm for Radium, Inc., run away with him. Of course, all of us were taught that enthusiasm ourselves—in school. But we soon got over it."

Chester ran his tongue over his lips.

"When Radium, Inc., can monkey with the Institute," said Doc, "it means one of two things. R.C. is getting pretty sure of himself or he's getting desperate. The Institute was the one thing that stood out against him. Up to now he hasn't dared to lay a finger on it."

Garrison had said nothing, but now he spoke: "By rights, Chester, we ought to kill you."

"You wouldn't dare," said Chester thinly.

"What difference does it make?" asked Garrison. "If we don't, another one of R.C.'s men will. You've slipped up. And R.C. doesn't give his men a chance to slip a second time."

"But you were talking treason," Chester insisted.

"Call it treason," snarled Garrison. "Call it anything you like. It's the language that's being talked up and down the System. Wherever men work out their hearts and strangle their conscience in hope of scraps thrown from Radium, Inc.'s table, they're saying the same thing we are saying."

The phone blared and Garrison put forth his hand, lifted the set and spoke.

"It's R.C.," Sparks yelled at the other end. "It's sort of weak, but maybe you can hear. Mars and Mercury are relaying."

"Hello, R.C.," said Garrison.

Static screamed in deafening whoops, and then R.C.'s voice sifted through, disjointed and reedy.

"—sit tight. We're sending men, ten shiploads of them."

"Men!" yelped Garrison. "What will we do with men?"

"Machines, too," scratched R.C.'s voice. "Manually operated machines—" More howls and screeches drowned out the rest.

"But R.C., you can't do that," yelled Garrison. "The men will die like flies. It'll be mass murder … it'll be like it was before—in the early days, before Masterson developed the radon brains. Men can't

work in those radium pits—not work and live."

"That's a lot of damn tripe," raved R.C. "They'll work—"

"They'll revolt!" shrieked Garrison.

"Oh, no, they won't. I'm sending police along."

"Police!" stormed Garrison. "Some of Streeter's bloody butchers?"

"I'm sending Streeter himself. Streeter and some of his picked men. They'll keep order—"

"Look, R.C.," said Garrison bitterly, "you'd better send a new commander, too. I'll be damned if I'll work with Streeter."

"Take it easy, Garrison. You're doing all right. Just a bunch of bad breaks. You'll make out all right."

"I won't work those men," snapped Garrison. "Not the way they'll have to work. Radium isn't worth it."

"You will," yelled R.C., "or I'll have Streeter sock you down in the pits yourself. Radium has to move. We have to have it."

"By the way," said Garrison, suddenly calm, his eyes on Chester, "you remember that Institute chap who came to replace Boone?"

"Yes, I seem to remember—"

"He's lost," said Garrison. "Walked out into the hills. We've combed them, but there's no sign of him."

Chester rose from the chair in a smooth leap, hurling himself at Garrison, one hand snatching at the phone. The impact of his body staggered Garrison, but the commander sent him reeling with a shove.

"What was that you said, R.C.? I didn't hear. The static."

"I said to hell with him. Don't waste time looking for him. There are more important things."

Chester was charging in again on Garrison, intent on getting the phone. Mac moved with the speed of lightning, one huge fist knotted and pulled far back. It traveled in a looping, powerful arc, caught the charging man flush on the chin. Chester's head snapped back, his feet surged clear of the floor, his body smashed against the wall. He slid into a heap, like a doll someone had tossed into a corner.

Doc crossed the room and knelt beside him.

"You hit too hard," he said.

"I meant to hit hard," growled Mac.

"He's dead," said Doc. "You broke his neck."

Outside, the eternal snowstorm howled, sweeping the jagged hills and lamp-lighted pits.

Doc stood in front of a port and watched the scurrying activity that boiled within the mine. Hundreds of armored men and hundreds of laboring machines. Three spaceships, stationed beside the stock pile, were being loaded. Streeter's police, with ready guns, patrolled the sentry towers that loomed above the pits.

The door opened and Garrison came in with dragging feet.

"How many this shift?" asked Doc.

"Seven," Garrison answered hoarsely. "A screen blew up."

Doc sucked at the dead cigar.

"This has to stop, Johnny. It has to stop or something is bound to crack. It's a death sentence for any man to be sent out here. The last replacements were criminals, men shanghaied off the street."

Garrison angrily sloshed the liquor in his glass.

"Don't look at me," he snapped. "It's out of my hands now. I'm acting only in an administrative capacity. Those are the exact words. Administrative capacity. Streeter is the works out here. He's the one that's running the show. He's the one that's working the men to death. And when they start to raise a little hell, those babies of his up in the towers open up on them."

"I know all that," admitted Doc. "I wasn't trying to blame you, Johnny. After all, we needn't kid ourselves. If we don't walk the line, Streeter will open up on us as well."

"You're telling me," said Garrison. He gulped the liquor. "Streeter knows that something happened to Chester. That yarn about his being lost out in the hills simply didn't click."

"We never meant it should," Doc declared. "But so long as we serve our purpose, so long as we throw no monkey wrenches, so long as we're good little boys, we can go on living."

Archie's voice grated from beyond the open laboratory door.

"Doctor, will you please come here?"

"Sure, Archie, sure. What can I do for you?"

"I would like to talk to Captain Streeter."

"Captain Streeter," warned Doc, "isn't a nice man. If I were you, I'd keep away from him."

"But nevertheless," persisted Archie, "I would like to talk to him. I have something that I'm sure will interest him. Will you call him, please?"

"Certainly," agreed Doc.

He strode out into the office and dialed the phone.

"Streeter speaking," said a voice.

"Archie wants to talk to you," said the Doc.

"Archie!" stormed Streeter. "Tell that lousy little hunk of gas to go chase himself."

"Streeter," said Doc, "it doesn't make any difference to me what you do; but, if I were in your place, I would talk to Archie. In fact, I'd come running when he called me."

Doc replaced the phone, cutting off the sounds of rage coming from the other end.

"Well?" asked Garrison.

"He'll come," said Doc.

Ten minutes later Streeter did come, cold anger in his eyes.

"I wish you gentlemen would tend to small details yourselves," he snarled.

Doc jerked his thumb toward the open door. "In there," he said.

Boots clumping angrily, Streeter strode into the laboratory.

"What is it?" his voice boomed.

"Captain Streeter," grated Archie's voice, "I don't like your way of doing things. I don't like Radium, Inc.'s way of doing things."

"Oh, so you don't," said Streeter, words silky with rage.

"So," continued Archie, "I'm giving you and your men half an hour to get out of here. Out of the mine and off this planet."

There were strangling sounds as the police captain fought to speak. Finally he rasped: "And if we don't?"

"If you don't," said Archie, "I shall force you to move. If the mine is not vacated within half an hour, I shall start bombardment."

"Bombardment!"

"Exactly. This place is ringed with cannon. It is a barbaric thing to do, but it's the only way you'd understand. I could use other methods, but the cannon probably are the best."

"You're bluffing," shrieked Streeter. "You haven't any cannon."

"Very well," said Archie. "Do what you wish. It's immaterial to me. You have thirty minutes."

Streeter swung around and stamped out into the office.

"You heard?" he asked.

Doc nodded. "If I were you, Streeter, I'd pull stakes. Archie isn't fooling."

"Cannon!" snorted the captain.

"Exactly," said Garrison. "And don't you ever think Archie doesn't have them. When the machines ran away they took along our tools."

Streeter's face hardened. "Let's say he had them, then. All right, he has them. So have we. We'll fight him!"

Doc laughed. "You'll play hell. Fighting Archie is a joke. Where are you going to find him? How are you going to corner him? There isn't any way to hit him, no way to come to grips with him. You can't defeat him. You can't destroy him. So long as there are radium beds there will always be an Archie."

"I'm calling Earth," said Streeter, grimly. "It's time the army took over."

"Call in your army," said Doc, "but remember one thing. The only thing you can fight is Archie's weapons. You may destroy his guns, but you can't hurt Archie. All he has to do is build some more. And those weapons won't be easy to hit. Because, you see, those guns will be intelligent. They won't depend on brass hats and military orders. They'll have brains of their own. You'll be fighting deadly intelligent

machines. I tell you, Streeter, you haven't got a chance!"

Streeter turned to Garrison with bleak eyes.

"You think the same?" he challenged and the menace in his voice was scarcely hidden.

"Archie isn't bluffing," Garrison insisted. "He can make guns, tanks, ships … in fact, he can duplicate anything we have—with improvements. He's got our tools and our knowledge and he's got something we haven't got. That's his knowledge, the knowledge he never shared with us."

"You both are under technical arrest," snapped Streeter. "You will remain inside the dome. If you venture out—"

"Get out of here," yelled Garrison. "Get out of here before I break your neck!"

Streeter got out, with Garrison's laughter ringing in his ears.

Doc glanced at his watch. "Fifteen minutes gone. I wonder what Streeter will do."

"He won't do anything," Garrison predicted. "He's pig-headed. He'll put in a call to Earth, have an expeditionary force sent out as a precautionary measure. But even now he doesn't believe what Archie told him."

"I do," said Doc. "You better put in a call to Mac. Tell him to hustle over here. I'd hate to have him get caught in the fireworks."

Garrison nodded and reached for the phone. Doc got up and walked into the laboratory.

"Well, Archie, how are you feeling now?"

"Why do you always ask me that, doctor?" Archie demanded irritably. "I'm feeling all right. I always feel all right. There's nothing to go wrong with me."

"Thought you might feel a bit different—starting a war."

"It isn't a war," insisted Archie. "It isn't even an adventure. At least, not the kind of an adventure the human race would understand. It is a part of a carefully studied plan."

"But why are you doing it, Archie? Why are you messing into this at all? The human race can't touch you. You could, if you wanted to, just go on disregarding them."

"You might be able to understand," said Archie.

"I sure would try," Doc promised.

"You know about me," said Archie. "You probably can imagine the sort of life I lived before the Earthmen came. For eons I was a thing without physical life. My life was mental. I developed mentally. I specialized in mentality, you see, because I didn't have a body to worry about. I thought and speculated and that was all right, because it was the only kind of life I knew. It was a good life, too, free of so many of the worries and annoyances of physical being. Sometimes I

wish it could have continued.

"I didn't have any enemies. I didn't even have neighbors to fight with. For I could be one or I could be many; I was sufficient to myself.

"I realized there was such a thing as physical being, of course, because I observed the few tiny animals that are able to survive on Venus. Pitifully inadequate physical life as compared with the life on Earth, but physical life nevertheless.

"I wondered about that life. I attempted to formulate a behavioristic pattern for such a type of life endowed with my mentality. Starting with small imaginings, I built that idea up into the pattern of a hypothetical civilization, a civilization that paralleled Earth's in some ways, differed from it vastly in others. It couldn't be the same, you know, because my philosophy was a far cry from the kind of thought that you developed."

The grating voice died and then began again—"I, myself, of course, can never live a life like that."

"But Earthmen could," suggested Doc, the cigar dangling in his mouth.

"You're right, doctor," Archie said. "Earthmen could."

"If you could force them to."

"I will force no one to do anything," Archie grated. "I am experimenting."

"But would the experiment be good for Earth? Would your way of life, your hypothetical civilization, be the right one for Earth to follow?"

"Frankly, doctor," said Archie, "I don't give a damn."

"Well, well," said Doc.

"There's something else, doctor," said Archie. "You and Garrison and Mac are in trouble."

"Trouble," admitted Doc, "doesn't rightly express it. We're in a mess clear up to our ears."

"There is a ship waiting for you," said Archie. "Back in the hills north of the dome. It is the fastest thing ever built for space."

"A ship!" cried Doc. "Where did the ship come from?"

"I built it," Archie said.

"You—"

What Doc had meant to say was engulfed by a wave of sound that seemed to rock the dome.

"There it goes!" yelled Garrison.

Doc ran into the office and through the port he saw debris still flying through the air—the tangled wreckage of machines and blasted ore.

The radium pits disrupted in another flash of blue-white flame and again thunder blanketed and rocked the dome. The two remaining

watch towers vanished in the upheaval and disintegrated in the blast, losing their identity in the clouts of flung-up earth.

"He's using high explosives," yelled Garrison.

"Of course," gasped Doc. "He wouldn't dare use radioactive stuff or he'd blast the planet to bits. No one would dare use anything but high explosives in a war on Venus."

The door swung open and Mac stumbled in.

"Thanks for the call," he said.

Men were running now out in the pits, scurrying like frightened ants, heading for the one spaceship which had escaped the shells.

The dust settled slowly over the battered field, now plunged in gloom with the shattering of the lights. And, as if by signal, the howling wind swept a sheet of snow down to blot out the sight.

When the snow cleared, the pits were empty of life—there was no movement in the blasted gouges. Fire spurted from the launching rockets of the one undamaged spaceship, the dome vibrating to the monster's take-off. Momentarily a trail of flame climbed into the clouds and then silence and grayness clamped down over the deserted mine and dome.

"That settles it," Mac commented. "We're left alone. We'll have to wait until the military comes and then—"

"You're wrong," said Doc. "There's a ship waiting out north in the hills for you two fellows. A ship that Archie built. Better take Sparks along with you. He's probably still around."

"For the two of us?" asked Mac. "Why not all of us?"

"I can't go," said Doc. "I have to stay. I have a job to do."

"Forget it, Doc," urged Garrison. "Archie really built that ship for you. You were the one he liked. You were the only one he liked."

Doc shook his head stubbornly. "No, I've thought it out. I can't go along. Archie says the ship is fast. If I were you, I'd head for the asteroids. Stick around there for a while. Maybe after a time you can come out. Things are apt to be different then."

"You're afraid of what R.C. would do to you if he caught you," jeered Mac.

"No. I'm not afraid of that," Doc protested. "He couldn't do any more to me then than if he had me now. And, anyhow, R.C. is through. He doesn't know it yet, but he's through for good and all."

"Mac," said Garrison, "let's tie the stubborn old fool up and take him along whether he wants to go or not."

"Look, Johnny," declared Doc. "I'd never forgive you if you did. Take my word for it. I have to stay."

"O.K.," said Mac. "If the benighted old goat doesn't want to go, let the rest of us get moving. I'll go hunt up Sparks. We don't want to have that war fleet Streeter called for pick us up as they are coming

in."

Garrison nodded dumbly and moved toward the door. With the knob in his hand, he turned back.

"I don't suppose I'll be seeing you again, Doc."

"I don't imagine you will. I'm sorry the way things turned out, Johnny. It was a dirty shame. And you so near to Earth and that easy-chair."

"Aw, hell," said Garrison, "who cares for easy-chairs?"

Doc watched through the port until he saw the flare of a ship painting the northern hills. His gaze followed the streak of flame that climbed up and out toward the Sun.

Up and out toward the Sun. Out where one could see the stars. Out to take their place with a race that could conquer those stars. A race that could stretch out its hand and handiwork to the farthest reaches of the Universe. A race that could trace new pathways between the galaxies. A race that could hang its signposts on distant solar systems.

But a race that needed leadership to do it—a leadership that would strike off its shackles, shackles such as Radium, Inc., would weave. Shackles born of hate and greed and jealousies.

Perhaps Man had gotten off on the wrong foot. Perhaps his philosophy had been all wrong even from the start. Perhaps a bit of alien philosophy, weird as it might seem at first, would be good for him.

With a sigh, Doc turned back to the room.

A mournful silence hung there. Machinery still throbbed and occasionally there was a whine of fans, but aside from that there was no other sound.

Doc selected a fresh cigar from his vest pocket and carefully cut it in two. One half he stuck in his mouth, the other went back into the pocket.

He headed for the laboratory, shutting the door behind him.

"Howdy, Archie," he said.

"You're a fool," said Archie.

"What's the matter now?"

"I gave you a chance," rasped Archie. "You threw it away. Don't blame me for anything that happens now."

"I had to have a little talk with you," said Doc.

"You could have had it before."

"No," persisted Doc. "This one had to be private. No chance for anyone to hear."

"All right," said Archie, impatiently, "go ahead and spill it."

"I just wanted to tell you something," Doc explained. "Something that might make you easy in your mind. I destroyed those notes Boone

made before he died."

"You did what?"

"I destroyed them. I didn't want to see you vulnerable. Because as soon as anything becomes vulnerable to the human race it's a goner, sure as shooting."

"Why didn't you tell me this before?" Archie rumbled.

"Because I couldn't make up my mind," Doc told him. "I had to think it out."

"You had a long time to make it up."

Doc swiveled the cigar from east to west. "Yeah, that's right. But somehow I couldn't seem to do it. I made the decision just a little while ago."

"What decided you?"

"A spaceship," said Doc. "A spaceship that you made."

"I understand," said Archie.

"You aren't as tough as you would like to have us think," declared Doc. "You might not have had them before, but since Masterson found you, you've absorbed some conception of human emotions. The spaceship proved it."

"I like you, doctor," Archie said. "You remind me of Masterson."

"I'm giving you the human race to carry out your experiment," said Doc. "It can be a great experiment. You have good material to work with. All you need to do is handle it right. Point it toward the stars and keep it going straight. I'm backing you against Radium, Inc. I think the human race will get a better break from you. Don't disappoint me, Archie."

"I hadn't thought of that," Archie rumbled. "Maybe your race does deserve a break."

"They aren't such bad folks. And, anyhow," Doc chuckled, "if they don't like the way you do things they can turn their backs on you. If they don't insist on radium, you have no hold on them. But if Radium, Inc., could beat you, there'd be no hope for them. They'd only fall deeper and deeper into slavery."

"Why are you telling me this?" Archie grumbled. "You had the knowledge that would have broken me. You haven't used it. You say you aren't going to. Why not let it go at that?"

"If you were a man," declared Doc, "I'd slap you down for that. I'm not trying to pose as a hero. There is something else."

"Yes?"

"Look, Boone was the only man who stumbled on the clue. Even he, perhaps, didn't realize all he had. But he might have. Given time, he certainly would have. But you killed him first. You had intended to all along as a means of escaping yourself. But his stumbling on the clue made you hurry up the job."

“I was defending myself,” Archie declared.

“Those notes were dangerous,” said Doc. “They gave the human race an angle for attack.”

“But you destroyed the notes. I’m safe now.”

Doc shook his head. “No, Archie, you aren’t. For, you see, I know.”

“But you wouldn’t tell.”

“Oh, yes, I would,” said Doc. “I couldn’t help but tell. R.C.’s police have ways to make one talk. Slick ways. Unpleasant ways. I’m a psychologist. I should know. And they suspect I may know more than I’ve ever told. Chester was curious about Boone’s reports—”

“But if you had escaped with the others, you could have hidden —”

“Even then, there would have been the chance they would have found me,” Doc declared. “Just an outside chance—but in a thing like this you can’t take any chances at all.”

He walked across the room, picked up the heavy stool.

“This is the only way to do it, Archie. There’s no other thing to do. It’s the only way we can fool them—you and I.”

Archie’s voice was cold, mechanical. “You don’t have to do it that way, doctor. There are other ways.”

Doc chuckled. “Psychological effect, Archie. First Boone, now me. Makes you sinister. After two accidents like this no one will want to study you too much—or too closely.”

He weighed the heavy stool in his hand, getting the feel of it.

His cigar traveled across his face. He lifted the stool and crashed it down.

Target Generation

This story was named "Target Generation" when it was submitted, via the author's agent, to Hugo Gernsback's new magazine, Science-Fiction Plus*, but in August 1953, after it appeared in the fifth issue of that publication under the title "Spacebred Generations," Clifford D. Simak reversed that change for further appearances of the story, and I have done so for this collection, too.*

As "Spacebred Generations," the story appeared with four footnotes—none of which, I believe, were the author's idea. Cliff Simak was not in the habit of inserting footnotes into his stories, which makes it significant that the only two stories by Simak to appear in that magazine both appeared with footnotes that did not read in any way like Cliff's writing, and that most of those footnotes were deleted from subsequent anthology appearances of the stories. And that is particularly thought provoking when one considers the dreary content of the footnotes that accompanied this story: The first was a dreadful explanation of hydroponics, the second was about the importance of written records, the third about the feasibility of having a spaceship run automatically, and the fourth about educational devices. Although all four were signed "The Author," I am convinced that they were written by Gernsback himself, so I have removed them for this publication. Believe me, you'd thank me for that.

As for the story itself, it may be the most thoughtful of all the generation-ship stories, dealing as it does with a potential problem that most such stories never considered: How do you prevent the passengers from feeling robbed and cheated of a normal life, from going mad with the knowledge that they are no more than carriers of life?

—dww

There had been silence—for many generations. Then the silence ended.

The Mutter came at "dawn."

The Folk awoke, crouching in their beds, listening to the Mutter.

It had been spoken that one day would come the Mutter.

And that the Mutter would be the beginning of the End.

Jon Hoff awoke, and Mary Hoff, his wife.

They were the only two within their cubicle, for they had no children. They were not yet allowed a child. Before they could have a

child—before there would be room for it—the elderly Joshua must die; and knowing this, they had waited for his death, guilty at their unspoken prayer that he soon must die—willing him to die so they might have a child.

The Mutter came and ran throughout the Ship. Then the bed in which Jon and Mary crouched spun upward from the floor and crashed against the wall, pinning them against the humming metal, while all the other furniture—chest and chairs and table—came crashing from floor to wall, where it came to rest, as if the wall suddenly had become the floor and the floor the wall.

The Holy Picture dangled from the ceiling, which a moment before had been the other wall, hung there for a moment, swaying in the air; then it, too, crashed downward.

In that moment the Mutter ended and there was silence once again—but not the olden silence, for although there was no sound one could reach out and pinpoint, there were many sounds—a feeling, if not a hearing, of the sounds of surging power, of old machinery stirring back to life, of an old order, long dormant, taking over once again.

Jon Hoff crawled out part way from beneath the bed, then straightened on his arms, using his back to lift the bed so his wife could crawl out, too. Free of the bed, they stood on the wall-that-had-become-a-floor and saw the litter of the furniture, which had not been theirs alone, but had been used and then passed down to them through many generations.

For there was nothing wasted; there was nothing thrown away. That was the law—or one of many laws—that you could not waste, that you could not throw away. You used everything there was, down to the last shred of its utility. You ate only enough food—no more, no less. You drank only enough water—no more, no less. You used the same air over and over again—literally the same air. The wastes of your body went into the converter to be changed into something that you, or someone else, would use again. Even the dead—you used the dead again. And there had been many dead in the long generations from the First Beginning. In months to come, some day perhaps not too distant now, Joshua would be added to the dead, would give over his body to the converter for the benefit of his fellow-folk, would return, finally and irrevocably, the last of all that he had taken from the community, would pay the last debt of all his debts—and would give Jon and Mary the right to have a child.

For there must be a child, thought John, standing there amidst the wreckage—there must be a child to whom he could pass on the Letter and the Reading.

There was a law about the Reading, too. You did not read because

reading was an evil art that came from the Beginning and the Folk had, in the Great Awakening, back in the dimness of Far Past, ferreted out this evil among many other evils and had said it must not be.

So it was an evil thing that he must pass on, an evil art, and yet there was the charge and pledge—the charge his long-dead father had put upon him, the pledge that he had made. And something else as well: the nagging feeling that the law was wrong.

However, the laws were never wrong. There was a reason for them all. A reason for the way they lived and for the Ship and how the Ship had come to be and for those who peopled it.

Although, come to think of it, he might not pass the Letter on. He might be the one who would open it, for it said on the outside of the envelope that it was to be opened in emergency. And this, Jon Hoff told himself, might be emergency—when the silence had been broken by the Mutter and the floor became a wall and the wall a floor.

Now there were voices from the other cubicles, frightened voices that cried out and other voices that shrieked with terror, and the thin, high crying of the children.

"Jon," said Mary Hoff, "that was the Mutter. The End will be coming now."

"We do not know," said Jon. "We shall have to wait and see. We do not know the End."

"They say…" said Mary, and Jon thought that was the way it always was.

They say. They say. They say.

It was spoken; it was not read nor written.

And he heard his dead father speaking once again, the memory of how he had spoken long ago came back.

"The brain and the memory will play you false, for the memory will forget a thing and twist it. But the written word will stay forever as it was written down. It does not forget and does not change its meaning. You can depend upon the written word."

"They say," said Mary, "that the End will come swiftly when we hear the Mutter. That the stars will no longer move, but will stand still in the blackness, and that is a sure sign the End is near at hand."

And, he wondered, the end of what? The end of us? The end of the Ship? The end of the stars themselves? Or, perhaps, the end of everything, of the Ship and stars and the great blackness in which the stars were spinning.

He shuddered to think of the end of the Folk or of the Ship, not so much that the Ship should end or that the Folk should end, but that the beautiful, efficient, well-balanced order in which they lived should end. For it was a marvelous thing that every function should be so ordered that there always would be enough for the Folk to live on,

with never any surplus. No surplus of food or water or air, or of the Folk themselves, for you could not have a child until someone assigned against the coming of that child should die.

There were footsteps running in the corridors outside the cubicles and excited shouting, and suddenly there was someone pounding on the door.

"Jon! Jon!" the voice shouted. "The stars are standing still!"

"I knew it!" Mary cried. "I told you, Jon. It is as it was spoken."

Pounding on the door!

And the door was where it should have been, where a door logically should be, where you could walk straight out of it to the corridor, instead of climbing the now-useless ladder that ran ridiculously to it from the wall-that-used-to-be-the-floor.

Why didn't I think of that before? he asked himself. Why didn't I see that it was poor planning to climb to a door that opened in the ceiling?

Maybe, he thought—maybe this is the way it should have been all the time. Maybe the way it had been before was wrong. As the laws might well be wrong.

"I'm coming, Joe," said Jon.

He strode to the door and opened it and he saw that what had been the wall of the corridor was now the floor and that many doors were opening into it directly from the cubicles and that folks were running up and down the corridor, and he thought: We can take down the ladders now, since we have no use for them. We can feed them into the converter and that will give us the margin that we never have.

Joe gripped him by the arm.

"Come with me," he said.

They went to one of the topsy-turvey observation blisters. The stars were standing still.

Exactly as it had been spoken, the stars were still.

If was a frightening thing, for now you could see that the stars were not simply spinning lights that seemed to move against the flatness of a dead-black curtain, but that they were hanging in an emptiness that took the pit out of your stomach and made you gasp and clutch the metal of the ports, fighting to keep your balance, fighting off the light-headedness that came upon you as you stared into a gulf you could not understand.

There were no games that "day," there were no hikes, there was no revelry in the amusement lounge.

There were knots of frightened people talking. There was praying in the chapel where hung the largest of the Holy Pictures, showing the Tree and the Flowers and the River and the House far off, with a Sky

that had Clouds in it and a Wind you could not see, but only knew was there. There was a picking up and a straightening up of the cubicles in preparation for a "night" of sleeping and a rehanging once again of the Holy Pictures that were the prized possession of each cubicle. There was a taking down of ladders.

Mary Hoff rescued the Holy Picture from the debris on the floor and Jon stood one of the chairs against the wall and hung it upon the wall-that-once-had-been-the-floor and wondered how it happened that each of the Holy Pictures was a little different from all the others. And it was the first time he had ever wondered that.

The Hoffs' Holy Picture had a Tree in it, too, and there were Sheep beneath the Tree and a Fence and Brook, and in the corner of the picture there were some tiny Flowers, and, of course, the Grass that ran up to the Sky.

After he had hung the picture and Mary had gone off to another cubicle to talk in horror-stricken, old-wife fashion with some of the other women, Jon went down the corridor, strolling as casually as he could so that no one would notice him, so that no one would mark any hurry in him.

But there was hurry in him—a sudden, terrible hurry that tried to push him on like two hands against his back.

He tried to look as if he were doing nothing more than genteelly killing time. It was easy for him, for that was all he'd done his entire life, all that any of them had ever done. Except the few, the lucky or unlucky ones, whichever way you might look at it, who had the hereditary jobs—tending the hydroponic gardens or the cattle pens or the poultry flocks.

But the most of them, thought Jon, loitering his way along, had done no more than grow expert in the art of killing time. Like he and Joe, with their endless chess games and the careful records that they kept of every move they made, of every move and game. And the hours they spent in analyzing their play from the records that they made, carefully annotating each decisive move. And why not, he asked himself—why not record and annotate the games? What else was there to do? What else?

There were no people now in the corridor and it had grown dimmer, for now there were only occasional light bulbs to drive back the darkness. Years of bulb-snatching to keep the living cubicles supplied had nearly stripped the Ship.

He came to an observation blister and ducked into it, crouching just inside of it, waiting patiently and watching back along his trail. He waited for the one who might have followed him and he knew there would be no one, but there *might be* someone and he couldn't take the chance.

No one came, and he went on again, coming to the broken-down escalator which went to the central levels, and here, once again, there was something different. Always before, as he had climbed level after level, he had steadily lost weight, lost the pull against his feet, had swam rather than walked toward the center of the Ship. But this time there was no loss of weight, this time there was no swimming . He trudged broken escalator after broken escalator for all the sixteen decks.

He went in darkness now, for here the bulbs were entirely gone, snatched or burned out over many years. He felt his way upward, with his hand along the guide-rails, feeling the cross-draft of the corridors that plunged down the great Ship's length.

He came at last to the proper level and felt his way along until he came to the hiding place, a dispensary room with a pharmaceutical locker against one wall.

He found the proper drawer and pulled it open and his hand went in and found the three things that he knew were there—the Letter, the Book, and a bulb.

He ran his hand along the wall until he found the outlet and when he found it he inserted the bulb and there was light in the tiny room, light upon the dust that lay across the floor and along the counter tops, light upon the wash basin and the sink, the empty cabinets with their idly open doors.

He laid the Letter face up beneath the light and read the words that were printed in block letters:

TO BE OPENED ONLY IN EMERGENCY.

He stood there for a long time, considering.

There had been the Mutter.

The stars were standing still.

Emergency, he thought. This is emergency.

For had it not been spoken that when the Mutter came and the stars stood still the End was near at hand?

And if the End was near at hand, then it was emergency.

He lifted the Letter in his hand and held it, hesitating. When he opened it, that would be the end of it. There would be no more handing down—no more of the Letter and the Reading. For this was the moment toward which the Letter had traveled down through time, from father to son for many generations.

Slowly he turned the Letter over and ran a thumbnail along the sealed edge, and the dry wax cracked open and the flap sprang loose.

He reached in and took the message out and spread it flat upon the counter top underneath the lamp. He read, his lips moving to form whispered words, reading as one must read who had spelled out the slow meaning of his words from an ancient dictionary:

To the son of my son many times removed:

They will have told you and by this time you may well believe that the ship is a way of life, that it started in a myth and moves toward a legend and that there is no meaning to be sought within its actuality and no purpose.

It would be fruitless for me to try to tell you the meaning or the purpose of the ship, for while these words are true, by themselves they will have little weight against the perversion of the truth, which by the time you read this may have reached the stature of religion.

But there is purpose in the ship, although even now, as this is written, the purpose has been lost, and as the ship plunges on its way it will remain not only lost, but buried beneath the weight of human rationalizing.

In the day that this is read there will be explanations of the ship and the people in it, but there will be no knowledge in the explanations.

To bring the ship to its destination there must be knowledge. There is a way that knowledge may be gained. I, who will be dead, whose body will have gone back into a plant long eaten, a piece of cloth long worn out, a molecule of oxygen, a pinch of fertilizer, have preserved that knowledge for you. On the second sheet of this letter are the directions for the acquiring of that knowledge.

I charge you to acquire that knowledge and to use it, that the minds and lives which launched the ship, and the others who kept it going, and those who even now reside within its walls, may not have used themselves, nor dedicated themselves, in vain, that the dream of Man may not die somewhere far among the stars.

You will have learned by the time you read this, even to a greater degree than I know it today, that nothing must be wasted, nothing must be thrown away, that all resources must be guarded and husbanded against a future need.

And that the ship not reach its destination, that it not serve its purpose, would be a waste so great as to stun the imagination. It would be a terrible waste of thousands of lives, the waste of knowledge and of hope.

You will not know my name, for my name by the time you read this will be gone with the hand that drives the pen, but my words will still live on and the knowledge in them and the charge.

I sign myself, your ancestor.

And there was a scrawl that Jon could not make out.

He let the Letter drop to the dust-laden counter top and words from the Letter hammered in his brain.

A ship that started in a myth and moved toward a legend.

But that was wrong, the Letter said.

There was a purpose and there was a destination.

A destination? What was that? The Book, he thought—the Book will tell what destination is.

With shaking hands he hauled the Book out of the drawer and opened it to *D* and followed down the columns with an unsteady finger: *desquamative, dessert, destinate, destination—*

> ***Destination*** *(n)—The place set for the end of a journey, or to which something is sent; a place or point aimed at.*

The Ship had a destination.

The Ship was going somewhere.

The day would come when it would reach the place that it was going.

And that would be the End, of course.

The Ship was going somewhere.

But how? Did the Ship move?

He shook his head in disbelief. That the Ship moved was unbelievable. It was the stars, not the Ship, that moved.

There must be, he felt certain, another explanation.

He picked up the Letter's second sheet and read it through, but didn't understand it all, for his brain was tired and befuddled. He put the Letter and the Book and the bulb back in the drawer.

He closed the drawer and fled.

They had not noticed his absence in the lower level and he moved among them, trying to be one of them again, trying to pick up the old cloak of familiarity and wrap it around his sudden nakedness—but he was not one of them.

A terrible knowledge had made him not one of them. The knowledge that the Ship had a purpose and a destination—that it had started somewhere and was going somewhere and that when it got where it was going that would be the End, not of the Folk, nor of the Ship, but only of the Journey.

He went into the lounge and stood for a moment just inside the doorway. Joe was playing chess with Pete and a swift anger flared within him at the thought that Joe would play with someone else, for Joe had not played chess with anyone but him for many, many years. But the anger dropped quickly from him, and he looked at the chessmen for the first time, really saw them for the first time, and he saw that they were idle hunks of carven wood and that they had no

part in this new world of the Letter and the Purpose.

George was sitting by himself playing solitaire and some of the others were playing poker with the metal counters they called "money," although why they called it money was more than anyone could tell. It was just a name, they said, as the Ship was the name for the ship and the Stars were what the stars were called. Louise and Irma were sitting in one corner listening to an old, almost worn-out recording of a song, and the shrill, pinched voice of the woman who sang screeched across the room:

"My love has gone to the stars,
He will be away for long…"

Jon walked into the room and George looked up from the cards. "We've been looking for you."

"I went for a walk," said Jon. "A long walk. On the center levels. It's all wrong up there. It's up, not in. You climb all the way."

"The stars have not moved all day," said George.

Joe turned his head and said, "The stars won't move again. This is as it was spoken. This is the beginning of the End."

"What is the End?" asked Jon.

"I don't know," said Joe and went back to his game.

The End, Jon thought. And none of them know what the End will be, just as they do not know what a ship is, or what money is, or the stars.

"We are meeting," said George. Jon nodded.

He should have known that they would meet. They'd meet for comfort and security. They'd tell the Story once again and they'd pray before the Picture. And I, he thought, and I?

He swung from the room and went out into the corridor, thinking that it might have been best if there'd been no Letter and no Book, for then he'd still be one of them and not a naked stranger standing by himself—not a man torn with wondering which was right, the Story or the Letter.

He found his cubicle and went into it. Mary was there, stretched out on the bed, with the pillows piled beneath her head and the dim bulb burning. "There you are," she said.

"I went for a walk," said Jon.

"You missed the meal," said Mary. "Here it is."

He saw it on the table and went there, drawing up a chair. "Thanks," he said.

She yawned. "It was a tiring day," she said. "Everyone was so excited. They are meeting."

There was the protein yeast, the spinach and the peas, a thick

slice of bread and a bowl of soup, tasty with mushrooms and herbs. And the water bottle, with the carefully measured liquid.

He bent above the soup bowl, spooning the food into his mouth.

"You aren't excited, dear. Not like the rest."

He lifted his head and looked at her. Suddenly he wondered if he might not tell her, but thrust the thought swiftly to one side, afraid that in his longing for human understanding he finally would tell her. He must watch himself, he thought.

For the telling of it would be proclaimed heresy, the denying of the Story, of the Myth and Legend. And once she had heard it, she, like the others, would shrink from him and he'd see the loathing in her eyes.

With himself, it was different, for he had lived on the fringe of heresy for almost all his life, ever since that day his father had talked to him and told him of the Book. For the Book itself was a part of heresy.

"I have been thinking," he said, and she asked, "What is there to think about?"

And what she said was true, of course. There was nothing to think about. It was all explained, all neat and orderly. The Story told of the Beginning and the beginning of the End. And there was nothing, absolutely nothing for one to think about.

There had been Chaos, and out of the Chaos order had been born in the shape of the Ship, and outside the Ship there was Chaos still. It was only within the Ship that there was order and efficiency and law —or the many laws, the waste not, want not law and all the other laws. There would be an End, but the End was something that was still a mystery, although there still was hope, for with the Ship had been born the Holy Pictures and these, in themselves, were a symbol of that hope, for within the pictures were the symbolism-values of other ordered places (bigger ships, perhaps) and all of these symbol-values had come equipped with names, with Tree and Book and Sky and Clouds and other things one could not see, but knew were there, like the Wind and Sunshine.

The Beginning had been long ago, so many generations back that the stories and the tales and folklore of the mighty men and women of those long-gone ages pinched out with other shadowy men and women still misty in the background.

"I was scared at first," said Mary, "but I am scared no longer. This is the way that it was spoken and there is nothing we can do except to know it is for the best."

He went on eating, listening to the sound of passing feet, to the sound of voices going past the door. Now there was no hurry in the feet, no terror in the voices. It hadn't taken long, he thought, for the

Folk to settle down. Their Ship had been turned topsy-turvy, but it still was for the best.

And he wondered if they might not be the ones who were right, after all—and the Letter wrong.

He would have liked to have stepped to the door and hailed some of those who were passing by so he could talk with them, but there was no one in the Ship (not even Mary) he could talk to.

Unless it were Joshua.

He sat eating, thinking of Joshua in the ponic gardens, pottering around, fussing with his plants.

As a boy, he'd gone there, along with the other boys, Joe and George and Herb and all the rest of them. Joshua then had been a man of middle age who always had a story and some sage advice and a smuggled tomato or a radish for a hungry boy. He had, Jon remembered, a soft gentle way of talking, and his eyes were honest eyes and there was a gruff but winning friendliness about him.

It had been a long time, he realized, since he'd seen Joshua. Guilt, perhaps, he told himself.

But Joshua would be one who could understand the guilt. For once before he had understood.

It had been he and Joe, Jon remembered, who had sneaked in and stolen the tomatoes and been caught and lectured by the gardener. Joe and he had been friends ever since they had been toddlers. They had always been together. When there was devilment afoot the two of them were sure, somehow, to be in the middle of it.

Maybe Joe…

Jon shook his head. Not Joe, he thought. Even if he were his best friend, even if they had been pals as boys, even if they had stood up for each other when they had been married, even if they had been chess partners for more than twenty years—even so, Joe was not one he could tell about this thing.

"You still are thinking, dear," said Mary.

"I'll quit," said Jon. "Tell me about your day."

She told him. What Louise had said. And what Jane had said. And how foolish Molly was. The wild rumor and the terror and the slow quieting of the terror with the realization that, whatever came, it was for the best.

"Our Belief," she said, "is a comfort, Jon, at a time like this."

"Yes," said Jon. "A great comfort, indeed."

She got up from the bed.

"I'm going down to see Louise," she said. "You'll stay here?" She bent and kissed him.

"I'll walk around until meeting time," he said.

He finished his meal, drank the water slowly, savoring each drop,

then went out.

He headed for the hydroponic gardens. Joshua was there, a little older, his hair a little whiter, his shuffle more pronounced, but with the same kind crinkle about his eyes, the same slow smile upon his face.

And his greeting was the joke of old: "You come to steal tomatoes?"

"Not this time," said Jon.

"You and the other one."

"His name is Joe."

"I remember now. Sometimes I forget. I am getting older and sometimes I forget." His smile was quiet. "I won't take too long, lad. I won't make you and Mary wait."

"That's not so important now," said Jon.

"I was afraid that after what had happened you would not come to see me."

"It is the law," said Jon. "You and I, nor Mary, had anything to do with it. The law is right. We cannot change the law."

Joshua put out a hand and laid it on Jon's arm.

"Look at the new tomatoes," he said. "They're the best I've ever grown. Just ready to be picked."

He picked one, the ripest and the reddest, and handed it to Jon.

Jon rubbed the bright fruit between his hands, feeling the smooth, warm texture of it, feeling the juice of it flow beneath the skin.

"They taste better right off the vine. Go ahead and eat it."

Jon lifted it to his mouth and set his teeth into it and caught the taste of it, the freshly-picked taste, felt the soft pulp sliding down his throat.

"You were saying something, lad."

Jon shook his head.

"You have not been to see me since it happened," said Joshua. "The guilt of knowing I must die before you have a child kept you away from me. It's a hard thing, I grant—harder for you than it is for me. You would not have come except for a matter of importance."

Jon did not answer.

"Tonight," said Joshua, "you remembered you could talk to me. You used to come and talk with me often, because you remembered the talk you had with me when you were a kid."

"I broke the law," said Jon. "I came to steal tomatoes, Joe and I, and you caught us…"

"I broke the law just now," said Joshua. "I gave you a tomato. It was not mine to give. It was not yours to take.

"But I broke the law because the law is nothing more than reason

and the giving of one tomato does not harm the reason. There must be reason behind each law or there is no occasion for the law. If there is no reason, then the law is wrong."

"But to break a law is wrong…"

"Listen," said Joshua. "You remember this morning?"

"Of course I do."

"Look at those tracks—the metal tracks, set deep into the metal, running up the wall."

Jon looked and saw them.

"That wall," said Joshua, "was the floor until this morning."

"But the tanks! They…"

"Exactly," said Joshua. "That's exactly what I thought. That's the first thing I thought when I was thrown out of bed. My tanks, I thought. All my beautiful tanks. Hanging up there on the wall. Fastened to the floor and hanging on the wall. With the water spilling out of them. With the plants dumped out of them. With the chemicals all wasted. But it didn't happen that way."

He reached out and tapped Jon on the chest.

"It didn't happen that way—not because of a certain law, but because of a certain reason. Look at the floor beneath your feet."

Jon looked down and the tracks were there, a continuation of the tracks that ran up the wall.

"The tanks are anchored to those tracks," said Joshua. "There are wheels enclosed within those tracks. When the floor changed to the wall, the tanks ran down the tracks and up the wall that became the floor and everything was all right. There was a little water spilled and some plants were damaged, but not many of them."

"It was planned," said Jon. "The Ship…"

"There must be reason to justify each law," Joshua told him. "There was reason here and a law as well. But the law was only a reminder not to violate the reason. If there were only reason you might forget it, or you might defy it or you might say that it had become outdated. But the law supplies authority and you follow law where you might not follow reason.

"The law said that the tracks on the wall, the old wall, that is, must be kept clear of obstacles and must be lubricated. At times we wondered why, for it seemed a useless law. But because it was a law we followed it quite blindly and so, when the Mutter came the tracks were clear and oiled and the tanks ran up them. There was nothing in the way of their doing so, as there might have been if we'd not followed law. For by following the law, we also followed the reason and it's the reason and not the law that counts."

"You're trying to tell me something," Jon said.

"I'm trying to tell you that we must follow each law blindly until

we know the reason for it. And when we know, if we ever know, the reason and the purpose, we must then be able to judge whether the reason or the purpose is a worthy one. We must have the courage to say that it is bad, if it is bad. For if the reason is bad, then the law itself is bad, for a law is no more than a rule designed for a certain reason or to carry out a purpose."

"Purpose?"

"Certainly, lad, the purpose. For there must be some purpose. Nothing so well planned as the Ship could be without a purpose."

"The Ship itself? You think the Ship has purpose? They say…"

"I know what they say. Everything that happens must be for the best."

He wagged his head.

"There must have been a purpose, even for the Ship. Sometime, long ago, that purpose must have been plain and clear. But we've forgotten it. There must be certain facts and knowledge…"

"There was knowledge in the books," said Jon. "But they burned the books."

"There were certain untruths in them," said the old man. "Or what appeared to be untruths. But you cannot judge the truth until you have the facts and I doubt they had the facts. There were other reasons, other factors…

"I'm a lonely man. I have a job to do, and not many come to visit. I have not had gossip to distract me, although the Ship is full of gossip. I have thought. I have done a lot of thinking. I thought about us and the Ship. I thought about the laws and the purpose of it all.

"I have wondered what makes a plant grow, why water and chemicals are necessary to their growth. I have wondered why we must turn on the lamps for just so many hours—what is there in the lamps that helps a plant to grow? But if you forget to turn them on, the plant will start to die, so I know the lamps are needed, that the plants need not water and chemicals alone, but the lamps as well.

"I have wondered why a tomato always grows on a tomato vine and why a cucumber always grows on a cucumber vine. You never find a tomato on a cucumber vine and there must be a reason.

"Behind even so simple a thing as the growing of tomatoes there must be a mass of reasons, certain basic facts. And we do not know these facts. We do not have the knowledge.

"I have wondered what it is that makes the lamps light up when you throw the switch.

"I have wondered what our bodies do with food. How does your body use that tomato you've just eaten? Why must we eat to live? Why must we sleep? How did we learn to talk?"

"I have never thought of all that," said Jon.

"You have never thought at all," said Joshua, "or almost not at all."

"No one does," said Jon.

"That is the trouble with the Ship," the old man told him. "No one ever thinks. They while away their time. They never dig for reasons. They never even wonder. Whatever happens must be for the best, and that's enough for them."

"I have just begun to think," said Jon.

"There was something you wanted," said the old man. "Some reason that you came."

"It doesn't matter now," said Jon. "You have answered it."

He went back, through the alleyways between the tanks, smelling the scent of green things growing, listening to the gurgle of the water running through the pumps. Back up the long corridors, with the stars shining true and steady now through the ports in the observation blisters.

Reason, Joshua had said. There is reason and a purpose. And that had been what the Letter had said, too—reason and a purpose. And as well as truths there will be untruths, and one must have certain knowledge to judge a thing, to say if it is true or not.

He squared his shoulders and went on.

The meeting was well under way when he reached the chapel, and he slid in quietly through the door and found Mary there. He stood beside her and she slipped her hand in his and smiled.

"You are late," she whispered.

"Sorry," he whispered back, and then they stood there, side by side, holding hands, watching the flicker of the two great candles that flanked the massive Holy Picture.

Jon thought that never before had he seen it to such a good advantage nor seen it quite so well, and he knew that it was a great occasion when they burned the candles for it.

He identified the men who sat below the Picture—Joe, his friend, and Greg and Frank. And he was proud that Joe, his friend, should be one of the three who sat beneath the Picture, for you must be pious and a leader to sit beneath the Picture.

They had finished reciting the Beginning and now Joe got up and began to lead them in the Ending.

"We go toward an End. There will be certain signs that shall foretell the coming of the End, but of the End itself no one may know, for it is unrevealed…"

Jon felt Mary's hand tighten upon his and he returned the pressure, and in the press of hand to hand he felt the comfort of a wife and of Belief and the security of the brotherhood of all the Folk.

It was a comfort, Mary had said while he had eaten the meal she

had saved for him. There is comfort in our Belief, she'd said. And what she had said was true. There was comfort in Belief, comfort in knowing that it all was planned, that it was for the best, that even in the End it would be for the best.

They needed comfort, he thought. They needed comfort more than anything. They were so alone, especially so alone since the stars had stopped their spinning and stood still, since you could stand at a port and look out into the emptiness that lay between the stars.

Made more alone by the lack of purpose, by the lack of knowing, although it was a comfort to know that all was for the best.

"The Mutter will come and the stars will stop their spin and they will stand naked and alone and bright in the depth of darkness, of the eternal darkness that covers everything except the Folk within the Ship. …"

And that was it, thought Jon. The special dispensation that gave them the comfort. The special knowing that they, of all the things there were, were sheltered and protected from eternal night. Although, he wondered, how did the special knowing come about? From what source of knowledge did it spring? From what revelation?

And blamed himself for thinking as he did, for it was not seemly that he should think such things at meeting in the chapel.

He was like Joshua, he told himself. He questioned everything. He wondered about the things that he had accepted all his life, that had been accepted without question for all the generations.

He lifted his head and looked at the Holy Picture—at the Tree and the Flowers and the River and the House far off, with the Sky that had Clouds in it and Wind you could not see but knew was there.

It was a pretty thing—it was beautiful. There were colors in it he had never seen anywhere except in the Pictures. Was there a place like that? he wondered, or was it only symbolism, only an idealization of the finest that was in the Folk, a distillation of the dreams of those shut up within the Ship…

Shut up in the Ship! He gasped that he had thought it. Shut up! Not shut up. Protected, rather. Protected and sheltered and kept from harm, set apart from all else which lay in the shadow of eternal night.

He bent his head in prayer, a prayer of contriteness and self-accusation. That he should think a thing like that!

He felt Mary's hand in his and thought of the child that they would have when Joshua was dead. He thought of the chess games he had played with Joe. He thought of the long nights in the darkness with Mary at his side.

He thought of his father, and the long dead words thundered in his brain. And the Letter that spoke of knowledge and of destination and had a word of purpose.

What am I to do? he asked himself. Which road am I to follow?

What is the Meaning and the End?

He counted doors and found the right one and went in.

The place was thick with dust, but the light bulb still survived. Against the farther wall was the door that was mentioned in the instruction sheet enclosed within the Letter—the door with the dial built into its center. A vault, the instruction sheet had said.

He walked across the floor, leaving footprints behind him in the dust, and knelt before the door. With his shirt-sleeve he wiped the dust from the lock and read the numbers there. He lay the sheet upon the floor and grasped the dial. Turn the indicator first to 6, then to 15, back to 8, then to 22 and finally to 3. He did it carefully, following the instructions, and at the final turn to 3 he heard the faint chucking sound of steel tumblers dropping into place.

He grasped the handle of the door and tugged, and the door came open. Slowly, because it was heavy.

He went inside and thumbed the switch and the lights came on, and everything was exactly as the instruction sheet had said. There was the bed and the machine beside it and the great steel box standing in one corner.

The air was foul, but there was no dust, since the vault was not tied in with the air-conditioning system which through centuries had spread the dust through all the other rooms.

Standing there alone, in the glare of the bulb, with the bed and machine and great steel box before him, terror came upon him, a ravening terror that shook him even as he tried to stand erect and taut to keep it away from him—a swift backlash of fear garnered from the many generations of unknowing and uncaring.

Knowledge—and there was a fear of knowledge, for knowledge was an evil thing. Years ago they had decided that, the ones who made decisions for the Ship, and they had made a law against Reading and they had burned the books.

The Letter said that knowledge was a necessary thing.

And Joshua, standing beside the tomato tank, with the other tanks and their growing things about him, had said that there must be reason and that knowledge would disclose the reason.

But it was only the Letter and Joshua—only the two of them against all the others, only the two of them against the decision that had been made many generations back.

No, he said, talking to himself, no, not those two alone—but my father and his father before him and fathers before that, handing down the Letter and the Book and the art of Reading. And he, himself, he knew, if he had had a child, would have handed him the Letter and the Book and would have taught him how to read. He could envision it—the two of them crouched in some obscure hiding place beneath

the dim glow of a bulb, slowly studying out the way that letters went together to form the words, doing a thing that was forbidden, continuing a chain of heresy that had snaked its way throughout the Folk for many generations.

And here, finally, was the end result, the bed and machine and the great steel box. Here, at last, was the thing to which it all had pointed.

He went to the bed, approaching it gingerly, as if it might be a hidden trap. He poked and prodded it and it was a bed and nothing more.

Turning from the bed to the machine, he went over it carefully, checking the wiring contacts as the instructions said he should, finding the cap, finding the switches, checking on other vital points. He found two loose contact points and he tightened them, and finally, after some hesitation he threw on the first switch, as the instructions said he should, and the red light glowed.

So he was all ready.

He climbed onto the bed and took up the cap and set it on his head, twisting it securely into place. Then he lay down and reached out and snapped on the second switch and there was a lullaby.

A lullaby, a singing, a tune running in his brain and a sense of gentle rocking and of drowsiness.

Jon Hoff went to sleep.

He woke and there was knowledge.

A slow, painful groping to recognize the place, the wall without the Holy Picture, the strange machine, the strange thick door, the cap upon his head.

His hands went up and took off the cap and he held it, staring at it, and slowly he knew what it was. Bit by painful bit, it all came back to him, the finding of the room, the opening of the vault, checking the machine and lying down with the cap tight upon his head.

The knowledge of where he was and why he was there—and a greater knowledge.

A knowing of things he had not known before.

Of frightening things.

He dropped the cap into his lap and sat stark upright, with his hands reaching out to grasp the edges of the bed.

Space! An emptiness. A mighty emptiness, filled with flaming suns that were called the stars. And across that space, across the stretches of it too vast to be measured by the mile, too great to be measured by anything but light-years, the space crossed by light in the passage of a year, sped a thing that was called a ship—not the Ship, Ship with a capital *S,* but simply a ship, one of many ships.

A ship from the planet Earth—not from the sun itself, not from

the star, but from one of many planets that circled round the star.

It can't be, he told himself. It simply cannot be. The Ship can't move. There can't be space. There can't be emptiness. We can't be a single dot, a lost and wandering mote in the immensity of a universal emptiness, dwarfed by the stars that shine outside the port.

Because if that were so, then they stood for nothing. They were just casual factors in the universe. Even less than casual factors. Less than nothing. A smear of wandering, random life lost amid the countless stars.

He swung his legs off the bed and sat there, staring at the machine.

Knowledge stored in there, he thought. What's what the instruction sheet had said. Knowledge stored on spools of tape, knowledge that was drummed into the brain, that was impressed, implanted, grafted on the brain of a sleeping man.

And this was just the beginning. This was only the first lesson. This was just the start of the old dead knowledge scrapped so long ago, a knowledge stored against a day of need, a knowledge hid away. And it was his. It lay upon the spools, it lay within the cap. It was his to take and his to use—and to what purpose? For there was no need to have the knowledge if there were no purpose in it.

And was it true?

That was the question.

Was the knowledge true?

How could you know a truth? How could you spot an untruth?

There was no way to know, of course—not yet was there a way to know the truth. Knowledge could be judged by other knowledge, and he had but little knowledge—more than anyone within the ship had had for years, yet still so little knowledge. For somewhere, he knew, there must be an explanation for the stars and for the planets that circled around the stars and for the space in which the stars were placed—and for the ship that sped between the stars.

The Letter had said *purpose* and it had said *destination* and those were the two things he must know—the purpose and the destination.

He put the cap back in its place and went out of the vault and locked the door behind him, and he walked with a slightly surer stride, but still with the sense of guilt riding on his shoulders. For now he had broken not only the spirit, but the letter of the law—he was breaking the law for a reason and he suspected that the reason and the purpose would wipe out the law.

He went down the long flights of the escalator stairs to the lower levels.

He found Joe in the lounge, staring at the chess board with the pieces set and ready.

"Where have you been?" asked Joe. "I've been waiting for you."

"Just around," said Jon.

"This is three days," said Joe, "you've been just around."

He looked at Jon quizzically.

"Remember the hell we used to raise?" he asked. "The stealing and the tricks?"

"I remember, Joe."

"You always got a funny look about you, just before we went off on one of our pranks. You have that same look now."

"I'm not up to any pranks," said Jon. "I'm not stealing anything."

"We've been friends for years," said Joe. "You've got something on your mind…"

Jon, looking down at him, tried to see the boy, but the boy was gone. Instead was the man who sat beneath the Picture, the man who read the Ending, the pious man, the good man, a leader of the Ship's community.

He shook his head. "I'm sorry, Joe."

"I only want to help."

But if he knew, thought Jon, he wouldn't want to help. He'd look at me in horror, he'd report me to the chapel, he'd be the first to cry heresy. For it was heresy, there was no doubt of that. It was a denial of the Myth, it was a ripping away of the security of ignorance, it was a refutation of the belief that all would be for the best, it was saying they could no longer sit with folded hands and rely upon the planned order of the Ship.

"Let's play a game," he said with resolve.

"That's the way you want it, Jon?" demanded Joe.

"That's the way I want it."

"Your move," said Joe.

Jon moved his queen pawn. Joe stared at him.

"You play a king's pawn game."

"I changed my mind," said Jon. "I think this opening's better."

"As you wish," said Joe.

They played. Joe won without any trouble.

At last, after days of lying on the bed and wearing the cap, of being lullabyed to sleep and waking with new knowledge, he knew the entire story.

He knew about the Earth and how Earthmen had built the ship and sent it out to reach the stars and he understood a little about the reaching for the stars that had driven humans to plan the ship.

He knew about the selection and the training of the crew and the careful screening that had gone into the picking of the ancestors of the colonists-to-be, the biological recommendations which had determined their mating so that when the fortieth generation should

finally reach the stars they would be a hardy race, efficient to deal with the problems there.

He knew about the educational setup and the books that had been intended to keep knowledge intact, and he had some slight acquaintance with the psychology involved in the entire project.

But something had gone wrong.

Not with the ship, but with the people in it.

The books had been fed into the converter.

The Myth had risen and Earth had been entirely forgotten.

The knowledge had been lost and legend had been substituted.

In the span of forty generations the plan had been lost and the purpose been forgotten and the Folk lived out their lives in the sure and sane belief that they were self-contained, that the Ship was the beginning and the end, that by some divine intervention the Ship and the people in it had come into being and that their ordered lives were directed by a worked-out plan in which everything that happened must be for the best.

They played chess and cards and listened to old music, never questioning for a moment who had invented cards or chess or who had created music. They whiled away not hours, but lives, with long gossiping, and told old stories, and swapped old yarns out of other generations. But they had no history and they did not wonder and they did not look ahead—for everything that happened would be for the best.

For year on empty year the Ship was all they had known. Even before the first generation had died the Earth had become a misty thing far behind, not only in time and space, but in memory as well. There was no loyalty to Earth to keep alive the memory of the Earth. There was no loyalty to the Ship, because the Ship had no need of it.

The Ship was a mother to them and they nestled in it. The Ship fed them and sheltered them and kept them safe from harm.

There was no place to go. Nothing to do. Nothing to think about. And they adapted.

Babies, Jon Hoff thought.

Babies cuddling in a mother's arms. Babies prattling old storied rhymes on the nursery floor.

And some of the rhymes were truer than they knew.

It had been spoken that when the Mutter came and the stars stood still the End was near at hand.

And that was true enough, for the stars had moved because the Ship was spinning on its longitudinal axis to afford artificial gravity.

But when the Ship neared the destination, it would automatically halt the spin and resume its normal flight, with thing called gyroscopes taking over to provide the gravity.

Even now the Ship was plunging down toward the star and the solar system at which it had been aimed. Plunging down upon it if—and Jon Hoff sweated as he thought of it—if it had not already overshot its mark.

For the people might have changed, but the Ship did not. The Ship did not adapt. The Ship remembered when its passengers forgot. True to the taped instructions that had been fed into it more than a thousand years before, it had held its course, it had retained the purpose, it had kept its rendezvous, and even now it neared its destination.

Automatic, but not entirely automatic.

It could not establish an orbit around the target planet without the help of a human brain, without a human hand to tell it what to do. For a thousand years it might get along without its human, but in the final moment it would need him to complete its purpose.

And I, Jon Hoff told himself, I am that man.

One man. Could one man do it?

He thought about the other men. About Joe and Herb and George and all the rest of them, and there was none of them that he could trust, no one of them to whom he could go and tell what he had done.

He held the ship within his mind. He knew the theory and the operation, but it might take more than theory and more than operation. It might take familiarity and training. A man might have to live with a ship before he could run it. And there'd be no time for him to live with it.

He stood beside the machine that had given him the knowledge, with all the tape run through it now, with its purpose finally accomplished, as the Letter had accomplished its purpose, as Mankind and the Ship would accomplish theirs if his brain were clear and his hand were steady. And if he knew enough.

There was yet the chest standing in the corner. He would open that—and finally it would be done. All that those others could do for him would then be done and the rest would depend on him.

Moving slowly, he knelt before the chest and opened the lid.

There were rolls of paper, many rolls of it, and beneath the paper, books, dozens of books, and in one corner a glassite capsule enclosing a piece of mechanism that he knew could be nothing but a gun, although he'd never seen one.

He reached for the glassite capsule and lifted it, and beneath the capsule was an envelope with one word printed on it:

KEYS.

He took the envelope and tore it open and there were two keys. The tag on one of them said: CONTROL ROOM. The tag on the other:

ENGINE ROOM.

He put the keys in his pocket and grasped the glassite capsule. With a quick twitch, he wrenched it in two. There was a little puffing sound as the vacuum within the tube puffed out, and the gun lay in his hands.

It was not heavy, but heavy enough to give it authority. It had a look of strength about it and a look of grim cruelty, and he grasped it by the butt and lifted it and pointed, and he felt the ancient surge of vicious power—the power of Man, the killer—and he was ashamed.

He laid the gun back in the chest and drew out one of the rolls of paper. It crackled, protesting, as he gently unrolled it. It was a drawing of some sort, and he bent above it to make out what it was, worrying out the printed words that went with the lines.

He couldn't make head or tail of it, so he let loose of it and it rolled into a cylinder again as if it were alive.

He took out another one and unrolled it, and this time is was a plan for a section of the ship.

Another one and another one, and they were sections of the ship, too—the corridors and escalators, the observation blisters, the cubicles.

And finally he unrolled one that showed the ship itself, a cross-section of it, with all the cubicles in place and the hydroponic gardens. And up in the nose the control room and in the back the engine rooms.

He spread it out and studied it and it wasn't right, until he figured out that if you cut off the control room and the engine room it would be. And that, he told himself, was the way it should be, for someone long ago had locked both control and engine rooms to keep them safe from harm—to keep them safe from harm against this very day.

To the Folk the engine room and control room had simply not existed, and that was why, he told himself, the blueprint had seemed wrong.

He let the blueprint roll up unaided and took out another one, and this time it was the engine room. He studied it, crinkling his brow, trying to make out what was there, and while there were certain installations he could guess at, there were many that he couldn't.

He made out the converter and wondered how the converter could be in a locked engine room when they'd used it all these years. But finally he saw that the converter had two openings, one beyond the hydroponics gardens and the other from within the engine room itself.

He let go of the blueprint and it rolled up, just like all the others. He crouched there, rocking on his toes a little, staring at the

blueprints.

Thinking: If there were any further proof needed to convince me, there lies that simple proof.

Plans and blueprints for the ship. Plans dreamed by men and drawn by human hands. A dream of stars drawn on a piece of paper.

No divine intervention. No myth.

Just simple human planning.

He thought of the Holy Pictures and he wondered what they were. They, too—could they, too, be as wide of the mark as the story of the Myth? And if they were it seemed a shame. For they were such a comfort. And the Belief as well. It had been a comfort, too.

He crouched in the smallness of the vault, with the machine and bed and chest, with the rolled-up blueprints at his feet, and brought up his arms across his chest and hugged himself in what was almost abject pity.

He wished that he had never started. He wished there had been no Letter. He wished that he were back again, in the ignorance and security. Back again, playing chess with Joe.

Joe said, from the doorway, "So this is where you've been hiding out."

He saw Joe's feet, planted on the floor, and he let his eyes move up, following Joe's body until he reached his face.

The smile was frozen there. A half-smiled smile frozen solid on Joe's face. "Books!" said Joe.

It was an obscene word. The way Joe said it, it was an obscene word.

As if one had been caught in some unmentionable act, surprised with a dirty thought dangling naked in one's mind.

"Joe—" said Jon.

"You wouldn't tell me," said Joe. "You said you didn't want my help. I don't wonder that you didn't…"

"Joe, listen…"

"Sneaking off with books," said Joe.

"Look, Joe. Everything's all wrong. People like us made this ship. It is going somewhere. I know the meaning of the End…"

The wonder and the horror were gone from Joe's face now. It had gotten bleak. It was a judge's face. It towered above him and there was no mercy in it—not even any pity.

"Joe!"

Joe turned around, swiftly, leaping for the door.

"Joe! Wait a minute, Joe!" But he was gone.

The sound of his feet came back, the sound of them running along the corridor, heading for the escalator that would take him down to the living levels.

Running back and going down the cry up the pack. To send them tonguing through the entire ship hunting down Jon Hoff. And when they caught Jon Hoff…

When they caught Jon Hoff that would be the End for always. That would make the End the kind of unknown End that was spoken in the chapel. For there would be no other—there would never be another who would know the Meaning and the Purpose and the Destination.

And because of that, thousands of men and women would have died in vain. The sweat and genius and longing of the people who had launched the ship would have been for nothing.

It would be a terrible waste. And wasting was a crime.

You must not waste. You must not throw away.

And that meant human lives and dreams as well as food and water.

Jon's hand reached out and grasped the gun and his fingers tightened on it as the rage grew in him, the rage of desperation, the last-hope rage, the momentary, almost blinded madness of a man who sees the rug of life being deliberately jerked from beneath his feet.

Although it was not his life alone, but the lives of all the others—Mary's life, and Herb's and Louise's and Joshua's as well.

He was running at full tilt when he went out the door and he skidded as he made the sharp right-angle turn into the corridor. He flung himself in the direction of the escalator and in the darkness felt the treads beneath his feet, and he breathed a thankfulness for the many times he had gone from the living quarters to the center of the ship, feeling his way in darkness. For now he was at home in the darkness and that was an advantage he had that Joe did not possess.

He hurled himself down the stairs, skidded and raced along the corridor, found the second flight—and ahead of him he heard the running, stumbling footsteps of the man who fled ahead of him.

In the next corridor, he knew, there was a single lamp, burning dimly at the end of the corridor. If he could reach the corridor in time…

He went down the treads, one hand on the rail to keep himself from falling, scarcely touching the treads, sliding down rather than running.

He hit the floor in a crouch, bent low, and there, outlined against the dimly burning lamp, was a running figure. He lifted the gun and pressed the button, and the gun leaped in his hands and the corridor suddenly was filled with flame.

The light blinded him for a second and he remained crouching there, and the thought ran through him: I've killed Joe, my friend. Except it wasn't Joe.

It wasn't the boy he'd grown up with. It wasn't the man who had sat across the chess board from him. It was not Joe, his friend.

It was someone else—a man with a judge's face, a man who had run to cry up the pack, a man who would have condemned them all to the End that was unknown.

He felt somehow that he was right, but nevertheless he trembled.

His sight came back and there was a huddled blackness on the floor.

And now his hand was shaking and he crouched there, without moving, and felt the sickness heaving at his stomach and the weakness crawl along his body.

You must not waste.

You must not throw away.

Those were spoken laws. But there were other laws that never had been spoken because there had been no need to speak them. They had not spoken you must not steal another's wife, they had not spoken you must not bear false witness, they had not spoken you must not kill—for those were crimes that had been wiped out long before the starship had leaped away from Earth.

Those were the laws of decency and good taste.

And he had broken one of them.

He had killed a fellow man.

He had killed his friend.

Except, he told himself, he was not my friend. He was an enemy—the enemy of all of us.

Jon Hoff stood erect and stopped his body's shaking. He thrust the gun into his belt and walked woodenly down the corridor toward the huddle on the floor.

The darkness made it a little easier, for he could not see what lay there as well as if it had been light. The face lay against the floor and he could not see the face. It would have been harder had the face stared up at him.

He stood there considering.

In just a little while the Folk would miss Joe and would start to hunt for him. And they must not find him. They must never know. The idea of killing long since had been wiped away; there could be no suggestion of it. For if one man killed, no matter how or why, then there might be others who would kill as well. If one man sinned, his sinning must be hidden, for from one sinning might come other sinning, and when they reached the new world, when (and if) they reached the target planet, they would need all the inner strength, all the fellowship and fellow-security they could muster up.

He could not hide the body, for there was no hiding place but could be found.

He could not feed it to the converter because he could not reach the converter. To reach it he'd have to go through the hydroponic gardens.

But no, of course, he wouldn't.

There was another way to reach the converter—through the engine room.

He patted his pocket and the keys were there.

He bent and grasped Joe and recoiled at the touch of the flesh, still warm. He shrank back against the metal wall and stood there, and his stomach churned and the guilt of what he'd done hammered in his head.

He thought of his father talking to him—the granite-faced old man—and he thought of the man, far back, who had written the Letter, and he thought of all the others who had passed it on, committing heresy for the sake of truth, for the sake of knowledge and salvation.

There had been too much ventured, too much dared and braved, too many lonely nights of wondering if what one did was right, to lose it now because of squeamishness or guilt.

He walked out from the wall and grasped the body and slung it on his shoulder.

It dangled.

It gurgled.

Something wet and warm trickled down his back.

He gritted his teeth to keep them from chattering. And he staggered along beneath his burden, climbing the long-stilled escalators, clopping along the corridors, heading for the engine room.

At last he reached the door and laid the burden down to fumble for the keys.

He found them and selected the right one and turned it in the door, and when he pushed against the door it swung slowly open. A gust of warm air came out and slapped him in the face. Lights glowed brightly and there was a humming song of power and the whine of spinning metal.

He reached down and lifted Joe again and went in and closed the door. He stood staring down the long paths that ran between the great machines.

There was one machine that spun, and he recognized it—a gyroscope, a stabilizer hanging in its gimbals, humming to itself.

How long, he wondered, how long would it take a man to understand all there was to know about all these massive, intricate machines? How far, he wondered, have we fallen from the knowledge of a thousand years ago?

And the thing he carried dangled on his shoulder, and he heard

the slow, deliberate dripping of the warm, sticky liquid splashing on the floor.

Horror and wonder—a going back. A going back through a thousand years to a knowledge that could build machines like these. A going back much farther to an instability of human emotions that would drive one man to kill another man.

I must be rid of him, Jon Hoff thought bitterly. I must be rid of him. But I never will be. When he has disappeared, when he has become something other than what he is, when the substances of him have become something else, I still shall not be rid of him.

Never!

He found the converter door and braced himself in front of it. He tugged at the door. It stuck, and he jerked at it and it came free. The maw gaped, large enough to take a human body, and from behind the baffles he could hear the roaring of the power and imagined that he caught the hellish flicker of the ravening fire.

He balanced the body on his shoulder and slid it off as gently as he could, feeding it to the maw. He gave it a final push and closed the door and trod hard upon the feeder mechanism.

The deed finally was done.

He reeled back from the converter's face and mopped his brow and now the burden was gone, but it still was with him.

As it always would be, he thought. *As it always would be.*

The footsteps came at him and he did not swing around to face them, for he knew whose the footsteps were—the ghostly footsteps that would dog him all his life—the footsteps of guilt walking in his mind.

A voice said, "Lad, what have you done!"

Jon said: "I have killed a man. I have killed my friend."

And he swung around the face the footsteps and the voice, because neither one was a ghost.

Joshua said: "There was a reason for it, lad?"

"A reason," said Jon Hoff. "A reason and a purpose."

"You need a friend," Joshua said. "You need a friend, my boy."

Jon nodded. "I found the purpose of the Ship. And the destination. He found me out. He was going to denounce me. I— I—"

"You killed him."

"I thought: One life or all? I took only one life. He would have taken all."

They stood for a long moment, facing one another.

The old man said: "It is not right to take a life. It is not right nor proper."

He stood there, stumpy and stolid, against the background of the engines, but there was something vital in him, some driving force

within him as there was in the engines.

"Nor is it right," he said, "to condemn the Folk to a fate that was not intended. It is not right to let a purpose go by default and ignorance."

He asked. "The purpose of the Ship? It is a good purpose?"

"I do not know," said Jon. "I can't be sure. But at least it is a purpose. A purpose, any purpose, is better than none at all."

He raised his head and brushed back his hair, plastered down with sweat across his brow.

"All right," he said. "I'll go along with you. I've taken one life. I'll not take any more."

Joshua spoke slowly, gently. "No, lad. I am the one who goes along with you."

To see the great depth of the emptiness in which the stars blazed like tiny, eternal watch fires, was bad enough when one looked out a blister port. To see it from the control room, where the great glass plate opened out into the very jaws of space, was something else again.

You could look down and down and there was no bottom, and you could look up or out and there was no stopping, and one moment you would swear that a certain star could be reached out for and plucked and the next moment it was so far away that your brain spun with the very thought of distance.

The stars were far.

All but one of them.

And that one blazed, a flaming sun, off toward the left.

Jon Hoff flicked a glance at Joshua, and the old man's face was frozen in a mask that was disbelief and fear and something touching horror.

And, he thought, I knew. I knew what it *might* be like. I had some idea. But he had none at all.

He pulled his eyes from the vision plate and saw the banks of instruments and his stomach seemed to turn over and his fingers were all thumbs.

No time to live with the ship, he told himself. No time to get to know it as it really is. What must be done he must do by intellect alone, by the sketchy knowledge impressed upon his brain—a brain that was not trained or ready, that it might take many years to make trained and ready.

"What are we to do?" Joshua whispered. "Lad, what are we to do?"

And Jon Hoff thought: *What are we to do?*

He walked slowly forward and mounted the steps to the chair that said NAVIGATOR on the back of it.

Slowly he hoisted himself into the chair and it seemed that he sat on the edge of space itself, that he sat upon a precipice from which at any moment he might slip off and tumble into space.

He put his hands down carefully and gripped the chair's arms and hung on tight and fought to orient himself, to know that he sat in a navigator's chair and that in front of him were trips and buttons that he could press or trip and that the pressing and the tripping of them would send signals to the pulsing engine room.

"That star," said Joshua. "That big one off to the left. The burning one…"

"All the stars are burning."

"But that one. The big one…"

"That's the one we headed for a thousand years ago," said Jon.

And he hoped it was. He wished he could be certain that it was the one.

Even as he thought it, bells of alarm were ringing in his brain.

There was something wrong.

Something very wrong.

He tried to think, but space was too close to think, space was too big and empty and there was no use of thinking. One could not outwit space. One could not fight space. It was too big and cruel. Space did not care. It had no mercy in it. It did not care what happened to the ship or the people in it.

The only ones who had ever cared had been the people back on Earth who had launched the ship, and, for a little while, the Folk who rode the Ship. And finally, he and one old man. They two against all space.

The only ones who cared.

"It's bigger than the others," said Joshua. "We are closer to it."

That was what was wrong!

That was what had rung the alarm within his mind.

The star was far too close.

It shouldn't be that close!

He wrenched his eyes from space and looked down at the control board and all he saw was a meaningless mass of trips and levers, banks of buttons, rows of dials.

He watched the board and slowly his mind began to sort it out, to make some sense of it, the knowledge the machine had pounded into him beginning to take over.

He read the dials and he got some knowledge from them. He located certain controls that he had to know about.

Mathematics rose unbidden in his brain and did a nightmare dance.

It was useless, he told himself. It had been a good idea, but it

hadn't worked. You couldn't educate a man by a machine.

You couldn't pound into him the knowledge necessary to navigate a ship.

"I can't do it, Joshua," he cried. "It's impossible to do it."

Where were the planets? he wondered. How could he find the planets? And when he found them, if he found them, what would he do then?

The ship was falling toward the sun.

He didn't know where to look for planets.

And they were going too fast—they were going far too fast.

Sweat burst out upon him, beading his brow and running down his face, dripping from his armpits.

"Take it easy, lad. Take it easy now."

He tried to take it easy, but it didn't work.

He reached down and slid open the tiny drawer beneath the control panel. There was paper there and pencils. He took out a sheet of paper and a pencil. He jotted down the readings on the dials.

Absolute velocity.

Increase of velocity.

Distance from the star.

Angular approach to the star.

There were other readings, but those were the essential ones, those were the ones that counted.

And one thought rose in his brain, one thought that had been impressed upon it time after time:

To navigate a ship is not a matter of driving it toward a certain point, but of knowing where it will be at any time within the immediate future.

He made his calculations, the mathematics struggling upward into his consciousness.

He made the calculations and he made a graph and then reached out and pushed a control lever forward two notches and hoped that he was right.

"You are making it out?" Joshua asked.

Jon shook his head.

"We'll know—an hour from now we'll know."

A slight increase in thrust to keep the ship from plunging too close toward the sun. Skirting the sun and curving back, under the attraction of the sun, making a long wide loop out into space, and then back toward the sun again.

That was the way it worked—that was the way he hoped it worked.

That was the way the machine had told him it might work.

He sat there limp, wondering about the strange machine, wondering how much reliance you could put in tape running on a

spool and a cap clamped on your head.

"We'll be here a long time," said Joshua.

Jon nodded. "I am afraid so, Joshua. It will take a long time."

"Then," the old man said, "I'll go and get some food."

He started toward the door, then turned back.

"Mary?" he asked.

Jon shook his head. "Not yet. Let's leave them in peace. If we fail…"

"We won't fail."

Jon spoke sharply. "If we do, it's best they never know."

"You may be right," the old man said. "I'll go and get the food."

Two hours later Jon knew that the ship would not crash the sun. It would come close, almost too close for comfort—only a million miles or so away—but the ship's velocity would be such that it would skim past the sun and climb out into space again, pulled to one side by the attraction of the sun, fighting outward against the pull of the flaming star, dropping off its speed on the upward, outward haul.

With its flight path curved inward by the sun, it would establish an orbit—a highly dangerous orbit, for on the next swing around, left to its own devices, the ship would crash the sun.

Between the time that it passed the sun and curved inward once again he must establish control over it, but the important thing was that he had bought some time. Without the added two notches of velocity he had gained by the shoving of the lever, he was sure, the ship either would have plunged into the sun or would have established a tightening orbit about it from which even the fantastic power of the mighty engines could not have pulled it free.

He had time and he had some knowledge, and Joshua had gone to bring some food. He had time and he had to use the time. He had the knowledge, lying somewhere in his brain, planted there, and he must dig it up and put it to the job for which it was intended.

He was calmer now and a little surer of himself.

And he wondered, in his own awkwardness, how the men who had launched the ship from Earth, the men who had watched and tended it before the Ignorance, could have shot so closely. Chance, perhaps, for it would have been impossible to shoot a thousand-year-long missile at a tiny target and have it hold its course…or would it have been possible?

Automatic—automatic—automatic. The word thrummed in his brain. The single word over and over again. The ship was automatic. It ran itself, it repaired itself, it serviced itself, it held true to the target. It needed only the hand and brain of Man to tell it what to do. Do this, the hand and brain of Man would say, and the ship would do it. That was all that was needed—the simple telling of instructions.

The problem was how to tell the ship. What and how to tell it.

And there were certain facts that haunted him about the telling of the ship.

He got down from the navigator's chair and prowled about the room. There was a thin fine dust on everything, but when he rubbed his sleeve along the metal, the metal shone as brightly as on that day it had been installed.

He found things, and some of them he knew and recognized and some of them he didn't. But, most important, he found the telescope, and after some trials and errors, he remembered how to operate it.

And now he knew how to find the planets—if this were the target star and there were any planets.

Three hours gone and Joshua had not returned.

It was too long to be gone just to get some food.

He paced up and down the room, fighting down his fears.

Something had happened, something must have happened to the old man.

He went back to the telescope and began the work of running down the planets. It was hard work and purposeless at first, but bit by bit, with the handling of the instruments, the facts started drifting up into his consciousness.

He found one planet—and there was a knock upon the door.

He left the telescope and strode across the room.

The corridor was full of people and all at once they were shouting at him, shouting hateful words, and the roaring of their voices was a blast of anger and of condemnation that sent him back a step.

In front were Herb and George and behind them all the others—men and women both, and he looked for Mary, but he didn't see her.

The crowd surged forward and there was hatred and a loathing on their faces, and the fog of fear came out of them and struck deep into Jon Hoff.

His hand went down to his waistband and closed upon the gun butt and he dragged the weapon free.

He tilted the gun downward and stabbed at the button, just one quick, light stab. Light bloomed out and filled the doorway, and the crowd went reeling back.

The door itself was blackened and there was the smell of blistered paint.

Jon Hoff spoke evenly: "This is a gun," he said. "With it I can kill you. With it I *will* kill you if you interfere. Stand back. Go back where you came."

Herb took a forward step and stopped.

"You are the one who is interfering," he declared.

Herb took another step.

Jon brought the gun up and lined its sights on him.

"I've killed one man," he said, "and I'll kill another."

And he thought: So easy to talk of killing. Of taking human life. So ready to do it, now that I've killed once.

"Joe is missing," said Herb. "We have been hunting for him."

"You need to hunt no more," said Jon.

"But Joe was your friend."

"And so are you," said Jon. "But the purpose is too big for friendship. You're with me or against me. There is no middle ground."

"We'll read you out of chapel."

"You'll read me out of chapel," said Jon, mocking him.

"We'll exile you to the central ship."

"We've been exiled all our lives," said Jon. "For many generations. And we didn't even know it. We didn't know, I tell you. And because we didn't know, we fixed up a pretty story. We fixed up a pretty story and we convinced ourselves of it and we lived by it. And when I come along and show you it was no more than a pretty story, dreamed up because we *had* to have a story—*had* to have, I say—you are ready to read me out of chapel and to exile me. You'll have to do better than that, Herb. Much better than that."

He patted the gun.

"I can do better than that," he said.

"Jon, you are mad."

"And you are a fool," said Jon.

At first he had been afraid, then he had been angry, and now there was only contempt—only contempt for them, huddled in the corridor, voicing feeble threats.

"What did you do with Joshua?" he asked.

"We tied him up," said Herb.

"Go back and untie him and send me up some food," he said.

They wavered. He made a threatening motion with the gun.

"Go," he said.

They ran.

He slammed the door and went back to the telescope.

He found six planets and two had atmospheres, No. 2 and No. 5. He looked at his watch, and many hours had gone. Joshua had still not appeared.

There had been no rap at the door. There was no food and water.

He climbed the steps to the navigator's chair again.

The star was far astern.

The velocity had slid way off, but was still too fast.

He pulled the lever back and watched the velocity indicator drop.

It was safe to do that—he hoped it was safe to do it. The ship was thirty million out and it should be safe to cut velocity.

He studied the board and it was clearer now—more understandable, more things he knew about.

It was not so hard, he thought. It would not be too hard. You had time. You had plenty of time. You had to plan ahead, but you had time to do it.

He studied the board and he found the computator he had missed before, the little metal brain—and that was how you told the ship. That was what he had missed before—that was what he had wondered about—how to tell the ship.

And this was the way you told it. You told the little brain.

And the one word—*automatic*—kept on hounding him. He found the stud that was labeled *telescope* and the one that was labeled *orbit* and still another that was labeled *landing*.

That was it, he thought.

After all the worry, after all the fears, it was as simple as all that.

For that would have been the way those back on Earth would have made the ship. Simple. Simple beyond belief. So simple that any fool could land it.

Just anyone at all who could punch a button.

For certainly they must have feared or guessed what might happen on the ship after several generations. They must have known how Earth would be forgotten and that there would be a cultural adaptation to the ship.

Feared or guessed—or planned?

Was the culture of the ship a part of the master plan?

Could the Folk have lived through a thousand years if they had known of the purpose and the destination?

And the answer seemed to be that they couldn't have been able to, for they would have felt robbed and cheated; would have gone mad with the knowledge that they were no more than carriers of life, that their lives and the lives of many generations after them would be canceled out so that after many generations their descendants could arrive at the target planet.

There had been only one way to beat that situation—and that was to forget what it was all about. And that is what had happened and it had been for the best.

The Folk, after the first few generations, had lived their little lives in the little circle of their home-grown culture and that had been enough. After that the thousand years had been as nothing, for no one knew about the thousand years.

And all the time the ship bored on through space, heading for the target, heading straight and true.

Jon Hoff went down to the telescope and centered Planet V and clamped over the radar controls that would hold it centered. He went

back to the computator and pushed the stud that said *telescope* and the other stud that said *orbit*.

Then he sat down to wait.

There was nothing more to do.

Planet V was death.

The analyzer told the story.

The atmosphere was mostly methane, the gravity thirty times too great, the pressure beneath the boiling clouds of methane close to a thousand atmospheres.

There were other factors, too. But any one of those three would have been enough.

Jon Hoff pulled the ship out of its orbit, headed it sunward. Back at the telescope, he found Planet II, locked it in the sights, tied in the computator and sat down to wait again.

One chance more and that was all they had.

For all of the planets, only two had atmospheres.

It had to be Planet II or none.

And if the second planet turned out to be death as well, what then?

There was one answer. There could be no other.

Head the ship toward another star, build up velocity and hope—hope that in another several generations the Folk could find a planet they could live on.

He was hungry—his belly gaunt and sore. He had found a water cooler with a few cups of liquid still intact, but he'd drunk the last of that two days before.

Joshua had not come back. There had been no sign from the Folk. Twice he had opened the door and gone out into the corridor, ready to make a dash for food and water, then reconsidered and gone back in again.

For he couldn't take the chance. He couldn't take the chance that they would sight him and run him down and not let him go back to the control room.

But the time would come before too long when he'd have to take a chance—when he'd have to make the dash. For before another day was gone he might be too weak to make it. And there were many days ahead before they reached Planet II.

The time would come when he'd have no choice. That he could stick it out was impossible. If he did not get food and water, he'd be a useless, crawling hulk with the strength and mind gone out of him by the time they reached the planet.

He went back to the control board and looked things over and it seemed to be all right. The ship was still building up velocity. The monitor on the computator was clocking its blue light and chuckling

to itself, saying *everything's all right, everything's all right.*

Then he went back down the steps and to the corner where he'd been sleeping. He lay down and curled himself into a ball, trying to squeeze his belly together so that it wouldn't nag him so and shut his eyes and tried to go to sleep.

With his ear against the metal he could hear the pulsing of the engines far back in their room—the song of power that ran through all the ship. And he remembered how he had thought a man might have to live with a ship to run her. But it had not turned out that way, although he could see how a man might learn to live with a ship, how a ship might become a part of him.

He dozed off and woke, then dozed off again—and this time there was a voice shouting and someone hammering at the door.

He came to his feet in one lithe motion, scrambled for the door, the key already in his fist, stabbing at the lock.

He jerked the door open and Mary stumbled in. She carried a great square can in one hand, and a huge sack in the other and boiling down the corridor toward the door was a running mob that brandished clubs and screamed.

Jon reached down and hauled Mary clear, then slammed the door and locked it. He heard the running bodies thud against the door and then the clubs pounding at it and the people screaming.

Jon stooped above his wife.

"Mary," he said, his voice choking and his throat constricting. "Mary."

"I had to come," she said and she was crying when she said it.

"I had to come," she said, "no matter what you did."

"What I have done," he said, "has been for the best. It was a part of the Plan, Mary. I am convinced of that. Part of the Master Plan. The people back on Earth had it all planned out. I just happened to be the one who…"

"You are a heretic," she said. "You've destroyed our Belief. You have set the Folk at one another's throats. You…"

"I knew the truth," he said. "I know the purpose of the ship."

She reached up her hands and cupped his face between her palms and pulled his head down and cuddled him.

"I don't care," she said. "I don't care. Not any more, I don't. I did at first. I was angry with you, Jon. I was ashamed of you. I almost died of shame. But when they killed Joshua…"

"What was that!"

"They killed Joshua. They beat him to death. And he's not the only one. There were others who wanted to come and help you. Just a few of them. They killed them, too.

"There's killing in the Ship. And hate. And suspicion. And all sorts

of ugly rumors. It never was like that before. Not before you took away Belief."

A culture shattered, he thought. Shattered in the matter of an hour. A belief twitched away in the breadth of one split second.

There was madness and killing.

Of course there'd be.

"They are afraid," he said. "Their security is gone."

"I tried to come earlier," Mary said. "I knew you must be hungry and I was afraid there'd be no water. But I had to wait until no one was watching…"

He held her tight against him and his eyes were a little dim.

"There's food," she said, "and water. I brought all that I could carry."

"My wife," he said. "My darling wife…"

"There's food, Jon. Why don't you eat?"

He rose and pulled her to her feet.

"In just a minute," he said. "I'll eat in just a minute. First I want to show you something. I want to show you Truth."

He led her up the steps.

"Look out there," he said. "That is where we're going. This is where we've been. No matter what we might have told ourselves, that out there is Truth."

Planet II was the Holy Pictures come to life entire. There were Trees and Brooks, Flowers and Grass, Sky and Clouds, Wind and Sunshine.

Mary and Jon stood beside the navigator's chair and stared out through the vision plate.

The analyzer gurgled slightly and spat out its report.

Safe for humans, said the printed slip, adding a great deal of data about atmospheric composition, bacterial count, violet-ray intensity and many other things. But the one conclusion was enough.

Safe for humans.

Jon reached out his hand for the master switch in the center of the board.

"This is it," he said. "This is the end of the thousand years."

He turned the switch and the dials all clicked to zero. The needles found dead center. The song of power died out in the ship and there was the olden silence—the silence of long ago, of the time when the stars were streaks and the walls were floors.

Then they heard the sound.

The sound of human wailing—as an animal might howl.

"They are afraid," said Mary. "They are scared to death. They won't leave the Ship."

And she was right, he knew. That was something that he had not

thought of—that they would not leave the ship.

They had been tied to it for many generations. They had looked to it for shelter and security. To them the vastness of the world outside, the never-ending sky, the lack of a boundary of any sort at all, would be sodden terror.

Somehow or other they would have to be driven from the ship—literally driven from it, and the ship locked tight so they could not fight their way back in again. For the ship was ignorance and covering; it was a shell outgrown; it was the womb from which the race would be born anew.

Mary asked: "What will they do to us? I never thought of that. We can't hide from them, nor…"

"Not anything," said Jon. "They won't do anything. Not while I have this."

He slapped the gun at his side.

"But, Jon, this killing…"

"There won't be any killing. They will be afraid and the fear will force them to do what must be done. After a time, maybe a long time, they will come to their senses, and then there will be no further fear. But to start with there is a need of…"

The knowledge stirred within his brain, the knowledge implanted there by the strange machine.

"Leadership," he said. "That is what they'll need…someone to lead them, to tell them what to do, to help them to work together."

He thought bitterly: I thought that it had ended, but it hasn't ended. Bringing down the ship was not enough. I must go on from there. No matter what I do, as long as I live, there will be no end to it.

There was the getting settled and the learning once again.

There were the books in the chest, he remembered, more than half the chest packed full of books. Basic texts, perhaps. The books that would be needed for the starting over.

And somewhere, too, instructions?

Instructions left with the books for a man like him to read and carry out?

INSTRUCTIONS TO BE PUT INTO EFFECT AFTER LANDING.

That would be the notation the envelope would carry, or another very like it, and he'd tear the envelope open and there would be folded pages.

Once before, in another letter, there had been folded pages.

And the second letter?

There would be one, he was sure.

"It was planned on Earth," he said. "Every step was planned. They planned the great forgetting as the only way that humans could carry out the flight. They planned the heresy that handed down the

knowledge. They made the ship so simple that anyone could handle it —anyone at all.

"They looked ahead and saw what was bound to happen. Their planning has been just a jump ahead of us every moment."

He stared out the vision plate at the sweep of land, at the trees and grass and sky.

"I wouldn't be surprised," he said, "if they figured out how to drive us off the ship."

A loudspeaker came to life and talked throughout the ship, so that everyone might hear. *Now hear this,* it said, the old recording just a little scratchy. *Now hear this. You must leave the ship within the next twelve hours. At the expiration of that time a deadly gas will be released inside the ship.*

Jon reached out his hand to Mary.

"I was right," he said. "They planned it to the last. They're still that jump ahead of us."

They stood there, the two of them, thinking of those people who had planned so well, who had thought so far ahead, who had known the problems and had planned against them.

"Come on," he said. "Let's go."

"Jon."

"Yes?"

"Can we have children now?"

"Yes," he said. "We can have children. Anyone who wishes may. On the ship there were so many of us. Now on this planet there are so few of us."

"There is room," said Mary. "Room to spare."

He unlocked the control room door, carefully locked it behind him. They went down the darkened corridors.

The loudspeaker took u again: *Now hear this. Now hear this. You must leave the ship…*

Mary shrank against him and he felt the trembling of her body.

"Jon. Are we going out now? Are we going out?"

Frightened. Of course she was frightened.

He was frightened, too.

One does not slough off entirely the fears of generations even in the light of truth.

"Not right away," he said. "I've got to look for something."

But the time would come when they would have to leave the ship, step out into the frightening vastness of the planet—naked and afraid and shorn of the security of the enclosing shell that could be theirs no longer.

But when that time came, he would know what to do.

He was sure he would.

For when the men of Earth had planned so well, they would not have failed in the final moment to have left a letter of instructions for the starting over.

War Is Personal

Not published until the January 1945 issue of Army-Navy Flying Stories*, this story was actually written in the last half of 1942, at a time when the United States was finally beginning to recover from the disaster of Pearl Harbor. No editor is listed in the masthead of the magazine, but Cliff sent the story to Leo Margulies, the editor of a magazine called* Air War*, whose name would later appear in connection with a lot of post-war science fiction. The cover price of that issue of the magazine was ten cents, and Cliff received thirty dollars for the story. Hinging on a pilot's psychology, the story is a bit unusual for its genre.*

—dww

The Jap flat-top was a beautiful target. Little red eyes wrinkled all over it, sending up a storm of shrapnel that exploded and looked like puffs of black silk unfolding in the air.

Bill Jackson crouched behind his gun in the rear seat of the Avenger and wondered whether his luck would ever change. During three years of service on board one of Uncle Sam's carriers—his luck, or rather, his lack of it—had become a legend.

Here he was again, right behind the eight-ball. As if it weren't bad enough to be on the tail end of the attacking torpedo force, he had drawn Lieutenant Cabot Hart as pilot.

Not that Hart wasn't a good pilot. He was. Jackson admitted there was nothing he could lay his finger on to justify his resentment for the man in the seat ahead. It rose from Hart's unbending correctness, from his inhuman aloofness even in the rush of battle.

Other pilots sometimes shouted insults at the Japs, or yipped in exultation when they dived on the enemy. Hart never did any of these things. Somehow one was made to feel that Hart thought insulting a Jap or yipping when he loosed a bomb or strafed a gun crew was not quite correct.

Over the howling of the Avenger's motor and the roaring of the guns below, came the dull crump of heavy bombs. That would be the land-based Fortresses from New Britain giving the destroyers a pasting.

Jackson craned his neck, searching for planes, eyes squinted against the sun. The sky was sprinkled with blossoming flak. Far to the east lay a cloud, a tiny line of black along the horizon. The thought that it might rain again edged itself into his brain.

Suddenly he stiffened, then whipped into action. High overhead

two black shapes were diving—Jap Zeroes!

One veered off, heading for another Avenger. But the second came down in a vertical dive.

The Jap was coming fast, banking on his speed to get him through. The Zero's guns flickered, and leaden slugs chewed into the Grumman's left wing. Jackson pressed the trigger, and the twin barrels of the Avenger's gun hammered with a coughing purr.

The Zero danced a jig in space under the impact, fell off, then slid seaward. Metallic ribbons fluttered from its peeling wing surfaces. The plexiglass over the pilot's head was splintered. Jackson knew the Jap was dead. He had been fast, but not quite fast enough.

"One down," Jackson reported, keeping his voice calm. With any other pilot he would have shouted.

"Good work, Jackson," said Hart, his voice crisp and brittle.

"Maybe," Jackson told himself, "the guy is just plain scared. Maybe he just talks that way to make me think he ain't."

But Hart had courage, plenty of it. He never let himself get enthusiastic—as if this war were a problem to be worked out on a blackboard.

The Avenger picked up speed in its dive. From the sea below came the thunderous roar of an exploding torpedo. A garish flare flickered, and smoke billowed from the sea.

Another Zero was coming in at an awkward angle. Caught off guard, Jackson swiveled his gun, trying desperately to get the enemy in his sights.

Steel snarled wickedly above his head, punching holes in the plexiglass. The Zero's guns spat angrily again, and the storm of slugs moved down the fuselage.

Jackson opened up, slewing the gun around to get at the body of the plane. He saw metal fly, saw bullets march into the cowling, heard, in turn, the chug of Jap bullets in the armor just behind his back.

Suddenly a wisp of smoke trailed from the Jap's ship. Then the Zero was out of range.

Straightening up, the gunner leaned over the side of the Avenger, saw the Jap streaking for water, trailing smoke.

"Two down," he said into the mike, but his voice was blotted out by a mighty roar.

"We got her!" yelled Jackson. "We got her!"

"Looks like it," Hart agreed.

The flat top was almost hidden by a towering column of smoke. Red flames curled through the pall.

Just ahead was another Avenger, heading straight for the stricken carrier. A single gun on the vessel opened up again, a red breath in

the smoke. Steel smacked into the water, raising sullen splashes.

Jackson saw the torpedo drop from the plane ahead, saw it streaking forward, a foamy wake behind it, while the attacking plane wheeled upward and disappeared in the smoke.

Then the very air shook as the torpedo hit. A wall of water rose, hung for a moment there in front of them, then fell back into the sea.

Hart was making his run. The carrier was listing, fire lapping its sides, while a dense black cloud towered up, edged with the flickering pink of raging flames.

Jackson leaped to his feet, yelled in triumph as Hart sent the Avenger scudding upward into the smoke above the carrier.

But there had been no sudden jump to the plane. There was no explosion. Jackson sat down again.

"You didn't use the torp," he said.

"The ship is sinking," said Hart. "Why waste a torpedo?"

"Yes, sir," said Jackson, "I guess there is no use."

But it was crazy, he told himself, to go to all that trouble just to pass it up.

Far below, the carrier was hidden by the column of blackness that rose from the sea. To the north were two other pillars of smoke. They would be her destroyer escorts. The Fortresses had taken care of them.

Far ahead were three dots, probably other Avengers heading home. Otherwise the sky was empty.

When Jackson looked back again there was no longer any cloud of smoke, just drifting wreckage on the water.

"She sank, sir," he told Hart.

Hart didn't answer. Now he was justified for not putting that torp into the flat top.

The excitement was over and, heading home, Jackson realized he was hungry. That was all right. In another hour or so he would be sitting down to steak and French fries.

"Jackson," said Hart, "do you see anything to the east?"

"Bank of clouds, sir. Noticed them a while back. Maybe we'll have another storm."

"Not that," said Hart, sharply. "More like smoke."

"Yes, sir," agreed Jackson. "Maybe another Jap ship."

"There are no Jap ships there," Hart said coldly.

Incongruously, Jackson thought of steak and fried potatoes.

"If they—" The words dried up in his mouth.

"We sank theirs," Hart reminded him.

There was no use trying to talk to a guy who looked at war as a diagram of opposing forces, at a carrier as a certain striking power, not a ship that spelled home and security for fighting men.

Jackson stared intently toward the southwest. A cloud of smoke,

lighter than the bank of angry clouds that were creeping up the sky, hung on the horizon. …

The United States carrier was listing. Smoke poured from the bow. But no confusion was apparent on board. Fire fighting crews were manning apparatus, others were clearing away wreckage on the deck.

A destroyer and a cruiser lay a half-mile off, sleek gray shapes in the water, standing by.

Blood pounding in his throat, Jackson stared down at the carrier as they circled it at low altitude. In the starboard bow was a gaping hole.

"A sub," he said.

Other planes were circling the ship, a homing brood with no place to land, for the tilting flight deck was impossible.

A sailor stepped out on the deck with two signal flags.

"They're ready to signal, sir," said Jackson. "Don't want to use the radio."

Hart nodded and swung the Grumman down toward the deck. Other Avengers, Jackson saw, also were coming in to get the message.

The signalman worked frantically, intent on finishing the wigwag before the planes swept past. Jackson kept his eyes glued on the flags.

"We're on our own," said Jackson. "Use our own discretion."

"I read it, Jackson," Hart snapped.

Jackson studied the back of the pilot's head, assessing the value of a sock in the snoot. But they were in a jam. Better be thinking about what they should do, although Hart would do what he wanted to.

There were two choices, Jackson knew. They could land in the sea and be picked up by the destroyer. Or they could try to reach land —Saipan, probably, for it was the nearest land in American hands.

If they landed in the sea, they would get away with a whole skin, but it would mean the loss of their plane. If they tried to make land, they could save the plane—if they reached land.

The gunner glanced at the sky. The entire eastern horizon was blanketed in slate-gray, and soot-black clouds half-way to the zenith. A storm was coming and coming fast.

Two of the Avengers were dropping down for a landing near the destroyer. Their gas supply, apparently, was too low to attempt a flight to land. The others circled as their pilots tried to make up their minds.

Hart didn't wait to see what they did. He swung the Avenger's nose east.

"I'm going to try for Saipan," he said. "You can come along or bail out. I'll pull over to the destroyer if you want to jump."

"We'll run into a storm, sir," Jackson pointed out.

"I've taken that into account," Hart told him.

That was the last straw. It was not enough that the man should suggest his gunner might want to jump to save his own neck. He had to take every opportunity to show his rank, to meet every suggestion with an insult.

"I'll stick with the ship," Jackson said. "Not with you, but the ship."

"You have made that distinction plain," said Hart. "You do not approve of me, Jackson?"

"How did you ever guess it?" Jackson asked.

Hart said nothing. Jackson settled down, fuming. Looking back, he saw that three of the Avengers were following them. The others were landing in the water. On the carrier, the fire crews seemed to be getting control of the blaze.

The sea, which had been blue before, was now an angry gray. The first drop of rain splashed against the shattered plexiglass.

The Avenger drove east, the Wright Cyclone howling a challenge to the wind. The raindrops came faster and thicker. Jackson pulled the hood forward, but water dripped through the holes the Jap bullets had punched.

Now they were flying in a world of storm, a world of streaming water. There was no sign of the other three Avengers, although Jackson knew they must be close behind.

The hours dragged on toward evening and the storm grew less. The overcast thinned, and the rain stopped. Scudding clouds parted to let the sinking sun paint a blood-red streak across the sea behind them.

The other Avengers were not in sight. Apparently they had taken another course in the storm.

Sky and sea were empty except for a small island off to the right. Sprawling like a huge horseshoe, it stood astride the sun's bloody path, with the surf painting a white fringe around it.

Hart's voice broke the silence.

"We're sitting down, Jackson. Gas is running short. Probably a break in the feed line."

"Yes, sir," said Jackson.

"A bullet might have nicked it," Hart declared.

"We took no bullets forward, sir," said Jackson smugly.

He had Hart dead to rights. The pilot had overestimated their fuel supply. That one about the fuel line was nothing but a feeble excuse.

The Avenger was gliding for the island which was larger than it had first appeared, and was heavily wooded. The lagoon on the inside of the horseshoe was well-sheltered, and on the outside rim ran a

narrow beach which broke abruptly into wooded heights.

Hart was heading for the beach. Jackson crossed mental fingers, envisioning holes or boulders that might crack them up. But the plane came down smoothly on a beach almost as smooth as a floor. Hart cut the engine, and the silence was deafening. Slowly Jackson became accustomed to the sound of the surf, the chatter of birds in the woods.

Leaning against the plane, Jackson lighted a cigarette. He found Hart staring at him with angry eyes.

"Why don't you go ahead and say it?" the pilot demanded.

"Say what?" asked Jackson.

"Tell me what a mess I've got us in."

"Robinson Crusoe made out, sir. So can we. The war'll be over some day. Somebody'll find us then."

"I ought to take a swing at you for a crack like that," Hart declared.

"If you want to fight, mister," announced Jackson, "I'm your man. But you got to hit me first. Regulations, you know."

Hart looked bewildered.

"You're the first man I've ever wanted to lick," he said. "I never wanted to fight anyone before."

"Yeah, I know. Not even the Japs."

"That's a lie, Jackson!"

"No, it isn't. You've shot at the Japs, sure, and bombed them. But you really haven't fought them. You've fought this war the way a man plays golf. You been fighting par, not the enemy."

"Jackson," asked Hart, "do you want me to take that swing at you?"

"Forget it," said Jackson. "Let's see what the lay-out is. Maybe we'll have to squat here a long time."

A twig snapped with a loud report in the jungle opposite the plane, and they stiffened to the alert. Something was moving through the jungle toward them.

It was a man, a white man. His ragged beard was white, and unkempt gray hair hung almost to his shoulders. He wore no shirt, and his trousers were held up by a piece of frayed rope.

He stopped at the edge of the jungle and blinked at them.

"Americans?" he asked.

Hart nodded.

"I saw you come in," the old man said, stumbling over his words, as if English were unfamiliar. "You must go away. The Japs are here."

"The Japs?"

"Over on the other side. Using the lagoon for a seaplane base. The natives are building a ramp for them."

Hart shook his head.

“I don’t understand, I’m afraid. Tell me who you are.”

“I’m Smith. At least you can call me that. Half beachcomber, half trader. Ran a little station here. Natives friendly, what there are of them. Only about fifty or so. When the Japs came, they didn’t kill me because I could make the natives work, or—” Smith ran his thumb across his throat.

“Perhaps the Japs didn’t see us land,” suggested Hart.

“Fat chance,” said Jackson.

“I’m afraid they did,” said Smith. “You must go.”

“We have no gas,” Hart explained.

“How many Japs?” asked Jackson.

“Only a dozen or so here regularly,” said Smith. “Ground crew and engineers. Otherwise they come and go. Sometimes there are as many as twenty planes. Other times, none at all. There are none here now. Once in a while a supply boat comes.”

“How far is Saipan?” asked Hart.

“Two hundred fifty miles,” said Smith. “If we could manage to hide you until night, I could get enough gas to you. The natives would help me. They hate the Japs.”

“You say there are no planes here now?” asked Jackson.

“Not now,” Smith told him. “They left yesterday. There was a battle.”

“We know about that,” said Jackson.

“It’ll be easy, then,” declared Hart calmly. “So long as there are no planes, we can keep out of their way. You get the gas down here —”

“Why bother with hide and seek business?” protested Jackson. “Let’s just drop in on the camp and take the gas away from them.”

The jungle rustled and Smith was gone—just as if he had stepped behind a bush and vanished.

“Now where did he go?” demanded Jackson.

The jungle rustled again and a squeaky, high-pitched voice sang at them:

“Put up the hands!”

A Jap officer stepped out of the undergrowth with a pistol in his fist. The bushes waved and three soldiers came out on the beach, rifles held at ready.

Jackson spat in the sand.

“Japs!” he said.

“Keep still,” the Jap yelled at him. “Put up your hands!”

Hart had his hands up.

“Get them up,” he snapped at Jackson. “There’s no sense in getting shot.”

Jackson raised his hands reluctantly.

“So sensible,” hissed the Jap officer. “And a nice plane, too. We shall be so interested in it.”

He squared off in front of the Americans, looked at them and laughed.

“Let me introduce myself. I am Matoka. Formerly of San Diego, in your own delightful country. After this war is over, I shall go back there to live. I like Americans. You are so ready to listen to reason.”

“I’m sorry now I didn’t go for my gun,” Jackson snarled. “I could of got two or three of them.”

“Perhaps you could have,” Hart agreed. “Then what?”

“Then we would have shot you,” Matoka said. He jabbed the muzzle of the pistol playfully at the pit of Jackson’s stomach.

“I have a hunch, Joe,” Jackson told the Jap, “that before this is over I’m going to have to kick your teeth right down your yellow throat. …”

The morning sun slanted through the broken windows of Smith’s old trading shack. From outside came the sound of hammering and sawing as the islanders labored, under a half-dozen Jap guards, at the half-finished seaplane ramp.

The shack was bare except for several cots, a few blankets piled in one corner, a stack of rifles and other odds and ends.

Matoka sat behind a small wooden table and regarded the two Americans before him. A guard stood at the door and two others were stationed at opposite walls.

“So,” said the Jap officer, “you refuse to give me information.”

“We are prisoners of war,” Hart told him. “We have given you all the information we are required to.”

Matoka leaned forward.

“Lieutenant Hart,” he said sneeringly, “you Americans still cling to the conventions of war, perhaps. You set up your silly rules and expect the world to follow.”

“They are rules of decency,” snapped Hart.

“Decency!” The Jap tried to mimic the tone. “Lieutenant, war is not decency. Consider—this island is out of the way. Who is there to know what happens to you here?”

He settled back in his chair and waited.

“I could break his scrawny neck,” said Jackson, calmly, “before one of those monkeys with the guns could stop me. Shall I have a try at it?”

Matoka laid his pistol on the table.

“By all means, Mr. Jackson,” he invited. “Go ahead and try.”

“You hold all the aces,” Jackson pointed out.

Matoka grinned. “You see, Lieutenant Hart. We do hold all the aces. So picturesque a phrase. Tell me, what happened to your

carrier?"

"Send your navy to find out," snapped Hart.

"You forget," corrected Jackson. "They haven't much of a navy. We just got through with it."

The Jap rose slowly. His eyes narrowed, and he leaned over until his face was inches away from the pilot's face.

"Tell me!" he shouted.

The pilot stiffened, said nothing. The Jap raised one hand and struck Hart across the cheek. The imprints of the Jap's fingers stood out white on the pilot's flesh and for an instant time seemed to stop.

Then Hart moved—silently, efficiently, ruthlessly. His hands caught Matoka's neck in a vise, dragging him across the table. The Jap's mouth opened for a scream that emerged as a tiny gurgle.

With a whoop, Jackson snatched up Matoka's pistol and wheeled. A bayonet was coming at him, less than a foot away. With suddenly cringing stomach, he twisted his body away—moving by instinct.

Gleaming Jap steel seared across his ribs, made a ripping sound as it jerked free of his shirt.

There was no time to shoot. Even had he wanted to, Jackson could not have shot, for he had grasped the pistol across its center. The Jap guard was unable to stop, was almost on top of him. Pinned against the table, the American slapped the pistol, flat-handed, straight into the astonished yellow face. The man went down.

Out of the corner of his eye, Jackson saw the guard by the door, his rifle leveled. Swiftly the Yank spun the pistol in the air, snatched the grip and snapped up the barrel. The rifle in the guard's hand roared, and Jackson felt the bullet whip past his cheek. Then the heavy revolver spat viciously, and the guard went down, rifle clattering across the floor.

Matoka was crawling on the floor where Hart had hurled him, making animal sounds. Hart had managed to ward off the plunging steel of the third guard, was wrestling with him for possession of the rifle.

With a savage wrench, the guard twisted the rifle barrel from the pilot's hand, stepped back, bringing the weapon up.

Jackson fired, and the heavy slug twisted the guard around, but he still clutched the rifle. The gunner fired again and the man's cap leaped from his head as he crumpled.

Wheeling about, Jackson ran to the door. Three Japs were racing up from the beach.

Jackson lined the pistol and fired. The leading Jap staggered, went down on one knee, then got up again. From the beach came the sullen bark of a rifle, and a bullet kicked dust at Jackson's feet.

One of the three Japs running toward the shack whipped up a

barking rifle. Jackson heard the bullets chugging into the door casing back of him. The pistol cracked again, and the Jap who had fired went down.

The guards at the ramp were firing now. One slug threw sand against Jackson's trouser legs. A red-hot flame slashed across his left forearm.

Behind him, a rifle opened up, talking as fast as a man could work the bolt. One of the Japs went down and the other turned and sprinted for the ramp.

Down the beach galloped a white man with no shirt, and with long hair flying. Smith waved a flashing machete, and as he ran he shouted strange gibberish. But the natives working on the ramp understood, for as one man they rose and surged toward the guards.

Knives and axes flashed in the morning sun. The Japs got in a few shots, made a few futile bayonet stabs and then, overpowered by sheer numbers, went down under the wave of howling islanders.

The lone Jap who had been running for the beach stopped short, then fled for the jungle. With a shout, Smith sped after him. The machete flashed over his shoulder, left his hand, glittering in the sunlight as it wheeled end over end. The Jap screamed in agony as it sliced into his back and brought him down.

Hart stepped from the doorway of the shack, rifle cradled in his arm.

"I guess, Jackson," he said, "we can get our gas now."

Jackson wiped his brow with a shirt-sleeve that trailed blood. "Yes, sir," he said.

"You've been hit," said Hart.

"A couple of scratches, sir," said Jackson. "One in the arm and one across the ribs."

A figure hurled itself out of the blackness of the shack behind them, landed on Hart's back. The pilot dropped the rifle and pitched forward in the dust. In the excitement of the moment Matoka had been forgotten.

But as Hart struck the ground, he rolled, breaking the Jap's grip.

Jackson started forward, pistol clubbed, but Hart yelled at him.

"Stay out of this, Jackson!"

The Jap charged in, apparently seeking a ju jutsu hold, but the American sidestepped and rocked him with a blow. Matoka's hand flicked out and grabbed Hart's wrist, threw him off his balance.

But as Hart went down, he managed to hook a toe back of the Jap's knee, almost upset him. The Jap's hold was broken, but Hart hit the ground flat on his back. With a scream of triumph, Matoka hurled himself through the air. Hart flung up hands to ward him off, but the Jap's weight crashed through.

For long seconds the two lay locked in straining effort. Once Jackson stepped forward, then stepped back. Hart had said it was his fight.

Suddenly Hart arched his back and heaved, shook Matoka loose. Struggling to one knee, the American slowly rose, holding the Jap at arm's length. On his feet, he released his grip on Matoka's shirt front and stepped back. The Jap charged in, head lowered.

Hart measured him and swung from the ground. The blow smacked in the morning silence, stiffened the Jap before he slowly crumpled.

Hart let his arms fall limply at his side, stared dazedly at the man who lay wilted at his feet. A trickle of blood ran out of the corner of Matoka's mouth.

"You killed him!" Jackson gasped.

"I meant to kill him," Hart said, quietly. "He slapped me."

Bare feet padded up the path from the beach, and the two saw Smith approaching. The white man's eyes flickered across the dead Jap officer and he tugged reflectively at his matted beard. "A good morning's work, gentlemen," he said.

"Those natives of yours," said Jackson. "They—"

"They have been waiting for a chance like this," Smith told him. "They are a proud people and they resented Jap brutality. They would have done it long ago, but I stopped them. I told them some of them would die."

He took a deep breath.

"Gentlemen, some of them did die. But the rest of them are free."

"But the Jap planes will be coming back," said Hart. "If not today, tomorrow."

Smith smiled quietly. "We shall be ready for them. The invaders landed guns, anti-aircraft. The planes will not suspect. We shall wait until they're so close we cannot miss."

He glanced around at the green palms swaying in the breeze.

"It was peaceful once," he said. "It shall be so again." He paused, then said, "Perhaps you gentlemen will be wanting to get on to Saipan."

Saipan field was taking a pounding. A large warship lay a few miles off shore and was heaving salvos of screaming steel into the tiny clearing.

"Looks like a battleship, sir," said Jackson.

"Perhaps," suggested Hart, "we should go down and see."

"We'd never make it," the gunner declared. "They'd open up on us with everything they had."

The Avenger, cruising almost at its ceiling, had the sky to itself. Apparently the Yank force was held down for the moment by the

bombardment of the field, while all Jap planes probably had been diverted for the naval engagement just fought, perhaps still being fought, to the west.

"Maybe," said Hart, "if we came in at them low over the water we might make it."

"It's worth a try," Jackson agreed.

"Okay, then," said Hart. "Pull up your feet. You're liable to get them wet."

The plane slid downward in the sky. Below them the Jap ship fired another salvo, the flash of the gun muzzles twinkling in the noonday light. On the air field, jets of smoke cascaded.

Jackson thought of the torpedo in the bomb bay—the torpedo Hart had refused to fire into the flat top. The gunner clenched his fists until the nails bit into his palms.

They had to get that ship!

If they didn't, it would churn the field into plowed ground, would rob the fighting leathernecks of their air support, would open the way for enemy counterattacks.

The Avenger droned downward until the uneven ground was just below its belly, skidded down the hillside just above the tree-tops, flashed above the foaming beach and headed out to sea.

Hart gunned the motor, and Jackson instinctively slouched into a crouch behind his gun. There probably wouldn't be much use for it. This would be Hart's show.

The Avenger scudded no more than fifty feet above the water. Ahead, looming against the horizon was the massive battle wagon in gray battle dress.

One of the forward batteries thundered, and Jackson could see the ship stagger at the recoil. Another battery let loose, then two together.

No one had noticed them as yet. Those firing batteries had given them a break.

Then a smaller gun spat from the ship, and another, and many more. A swelter of shrapnel burst to the right, and geysers of water churned around them.

The battleship loomed up with a rush. The plane jerked to an impact and Jackson saw ribboned metal fluttering from the right wing. Geysering water curled above them and descended on the plane, drenching it.

Hart was swearing under his breath—a stream of malefaction against the Jap—and then there was the bump that told Jackson the torpedo was on its way.

The Avenger tilted up and seemed almost to claw at the sky in its rush to get away.

Jackson found himself standing up and yelling while metallic death whined and droned and zipped around him.

A gust of flame speared out against the battleship and the great hulk shuddered from stem to stern, heeled over, rocked violently.

Two thousand pounds of naval torpedo had hit the ship just below the waterline and penetrated, spewing death and destruction deep within its bowels.

The Avenger raced with howling motor for safety in the sky. Below wallowed a stricken ship, perhaps not badly enough damaged to sink, but at least put out of action.

"Looks like we got the dirty son!" yelled Hart.

"We did, sir!" Jackson yelled back.

"He slapped my face," said Hart.

And Jackson, suddenly limp, knew then that for Hart this war never again would be impersonal. It took a slap across the face to give him hatred of all things Japanese.

"How many rounds have you left?" yelled Hart.

"Three cans, sir," said Jackson.

"I got all my belts full," declared Hart, almost proudly. "What say we give 'em the works?"

Jackson looked down. They were almost over the smoking ship now.

"By all means, sir," said Jackson happily.

Hart tilted the nose of the Avenger down and the Wright Cyclone screamed a song of hate.

"Here we come!" Hart yelled.

The machine-guns in the wings broke into a roar.

Nine Lives

This story, which features variations on some themes that have appeared in other stories, has not been seen by very many Simak fans—it was only published once, in the December 1957 issue of Short Stories Magazine *(which was not a science fiction magazine, but a publication that featured stories from all genres, including Westerns, mysteries, and so on); and it was never reprinted.*

After finishing the story in early January of 1957, Cliff sent it to H. L. Gold of Galaxy Science Fiction. *While waiting for a reaction, he considered the idea of changing the title to "Safety Valve," but did not do so in the end. When Gold rejected the story, Cliff sent it to a different editor, including, as he put it in his journal, "a feeble note." He went on to add, poignantly, "Wish I could write good letters." But after the story was again rejected, Cliff sent it to Leo Margulies, who bought the story at the end of March.*

I was surprised to find the story among Cliff's papers after his death. I'm glad I did.

—dww

I

Gilchrist Wolfe went to the shelf and took down the journal. On a clean, blank page he wrote: *Goff closed the Henderson case today. There is no explanation for the man's disappearance.*

After he had made that last entry he leafed through the pages backwards, slowly, pretending to himself that he was just browsing through them. But he came at last, as surely as if he'd planned it, to that tragic, earlier entry of thirty years before.

The date was Oct. 16, 2334, and the statement began: *Antony Tuckerman disappeared today. …*

He did not read the rest of it. There was no necessity for him to read it. He could have recited it, letter perfectly, if he had been called upon to do so.

And now there were other comments and statements of fact—today's, the one he'd just made, and the one which he had made ten days previously. And he hoped he'd made his concluding comment as dispassionate, and as scientific as Wilfred Soames' original entry of thirty years before.

He turned forward again to his final summing up, and was somewhat astonished—although he should not have been—to find that except for the names he had written almost the same words which Soames had put down on that October day so long ago—*July 23, 2364—Sartwell Henderson disappeared last night. …*

And why not, he asked himself. Both of them had written of identical incidents, although the men involved had not been the same.

Wolfe wondered vaguely if Henderson and Tuckerman might not have known each other. He decided that they might have. But that did not mean that the coincidence had the slightest bearing on their fate. Probably, he concluded, that aspect of the mystery had no significance whatever. Goff would have checked into such a relationship if he had thought it in any way vital, for Goff was as good a security officer as anyone could wish.

Wolfe turned back to the Tuckerman entry and read it again, despite the fact that he already knew it by heart. He wondered if there might be some clue until now unnoticed—some lurking, hidden hint. But he quickly realized there was nothing of the sort—nothing new at all. It was as terse and as unimaginative as it had always been, because it had been written by a man who had not dared allow himself to entertain the slightest hope. It was a barren recital of a positive fact, and nothing more. And that, thought Wolfe, was entirely understandable. In each of the incidents there was one great central fact: A man had disappeared. He had not run away, and he had not been kidnapped. He had simply vanished. In the here and now one instant, gone out of it the next.

Slowly he let the pages slide beneath the slight pressure of his thumb, a gray, fluttering blur of written entries, accumulated through the years—accounts of minor triumphs, of imagined breakthroughs, of recurring failures and ancient disappointments.

Only in the instances of Tuckerman and Henderson, Wolfe reminded himself, was the word “failure” open to doubt. Of all the thousands who had worked on Hourglass through the years, those two alone may have escaped from the present into another past or another future, remote from the here and now.

He got up and put the journal back on the shelf again.

And if there were triumph in Tuckerman and Henderson, he told himself, if there were solution and success, even though it might be lost—then there still was hope.

He crossed the room and went down the central hall. At the outer door the guard saluted him with sleek military poise, as he and others like him had come briskly to attention for so many years in this dooryard area flecked with mottled sunshine filtering through the maples.

“Did you know, sir,” asked the guard, “that Old Molly had her kittens early this morning?”

Wolfe felt his face relax a bit, but he did not smile. “No. How many this time?”

“Four,” said the guard. “One is white and one is gray and the other two are black.”

“Well, that is fine,” said Wolfe. “Thanks for telling me.”

He proceeded along the brick walk, beneath the maple shade, heading for the laboratory-workshops which in the old days, when Hourglass was still in the blueprint stage, had served as barns and stables and other farm outbuildings. Even now, he thought, it was a good place for old mother cats to bring forth their kittens.

In this pleasant land, he thought, the dreams of men and cats—and what would cats dream of? Perhaps of meadow mice and great bowls of yellow cream and a cozy chair set in a magic window through which a gentle, mellow sun would shine forever and forever. Surely not for cats the dreams of inspired madness which scurried like frightened monsters in the minds of men. There was only one reservation which he felt compelled to make. In men the dreams were not entirely madness, for nothing which could be translated into reality and put to practical use could be termed entirely mad.

Here in this quietness of ancient, sun-bleached buildings, of old fields overgrown with briar patches and overrun with rabbits, of lazy meadow stream, and distant hills blue in the tide of noon, Man threw the high, bright impudence of his argument and dreaming straight into the face of Time.

And through the years of setback and of failure Man by his daring had gained a few precarious advances, the rude beginnings of some as yet uncharted science which would someday, perhaps, transform the world.

But more than that: Two men had disappeared!

The path came to an end and Wolfe strode swiftly across the sun-drenched, hard-packed ground of the one-time barnyard. Just inside the first of the barns he halted for an instant, while his eyes adjusted to the soft, cool shadows. As he stood there blinking he heard Joel Strang coming toward him.

“Is that you, Gil?” the young man asked.

“Yes, Joel,” said Wolfe. “How are your pets today?”

“Twelve here. Five gone. I’ve been watching them.”

“You are always watching them.”

“I wonder what they are.”

“I don’t care what they are,” Wolfe told him. “What I want to know is where they go—and how.”

“Not *why*?”

"For God's sake, Joel, why should I care why?"

"Because there just might be some connection. If we knew their purpose and their motive—why they go away, and why they come back again—then perhaps we'd be a little closer to the *how* of it. If I could only talk with them!"

"You can't talk with them," snapped Wolfe. "They're animals. That's all. Just alien animals."

He clamped his mouth so tight that he could feel the muscles knot along his cheek. This was a silly business, he reminded himself, this senseless bickering with Joel Strang about the Whitherers. If the fool thought he could talk with them, let him go ahead and think it. It was no more fantastic than a hundred other things which had been tried in Hourglass.

Not until that moment had Wolfe realized the tension he was laboring under, a tension which he shared with every man on the project. And it could not be attributed solely to Henderson's disappearance. It was far more than that. It was inseparable from the work itself. It was something that grew and swelled and ballooned inside a man until it almost choked him.

Perhaps, he thought, it had to do with the strange, long-range urgency associated with the project—not a matter of days or months or years, but of centuries. Even more, perhaps, it had to do with the sense of utter doom which would foreshadow the centuries' end—unless Hourglass could provide an answer, and send Project Paradox into fine-honed action at last.

The urgency of the swiftly passing months and years was something that was personal and understandable—something that any one man could equate with his being. With such an urgency it was win or lose and let's have it over with. It was a challenge that stirred the blood and sent the breath whistling from a man's nostrils, and it was accompanied by a feeling of personal and immediate necessity.

But about the longer-range urgency of the centuries there was nothing quite so immediate. The problem was almost an academic one, even though the doom was inexorable. For that very reason a man fought all the time to keep within his mind this feeling of urgency. He woke in the night to scare himself with it. He tried to conjure up the exact, terrifying shape of future doom as a spur to drive himself. And so he fought not one good fight, but two.

Wolfe saw that Strang was looking at him with a perplexed expression.

"I was just thinking, Joel," he said. "The project has been going on for almost two hundred years and we still haven't made much progress. We have only the Whitherers, the Telmont Evidence, and the Munn equations. And now two men have disappeared."

"When it comes," said Joel, "it will come like that." He snapped his fingers, rather clumsily.

"Why do you think that?"

"I don't know," said Strang.

Wolfe moved toward the cages that housed the Whitherers, Strang falling into step beside him.

Standing in front of a glass-paneled cage, Wolfe wondered if he'd ever be able to look at its denizens without feeling his soul shriveling up inside him. Their hideousness one could understand. But why must they also be so pugnaciously revolting and outrageous. They were no bigger than large rats, with an aspect of having been flayed alive—so swiftly and so recently that they had not had time to bleed.

Wolfe watched them, fascinated, waiting for the blood to ooze, and they stared back at him, impudently. Not quite hatefully, perhaps, but the look in their eyes was not far from hate and it was linked with a sort of arrogant pride that was more than unnerving.

"I know now why I said it would come all at once," Strang murmured. "I sometimes get the feeling, standing here and watching them, that in just a little while I'll know what it's all about."

"I thought you said there were twelve of them," said Wolfe. "There are eleven now."

Strang sighed. "That's the way it goes all the blessed time. A man can't keep tab on them."

Now, Wolfe saw, there were thirteen of them. Out in a blank space of the cage floor, where there had been no Whitherers before, there were now two of them.

"Joel, where do they go? Do you think they move in time?"

"Sometimes I think they do," said Strang. "If I could only talk with them. …"

"I know you've checked, but invisibility can be a pretty elusive attribute."

Strang shook his head. "We know, we absolutely know, that it's not invisibility. They go *somewhere.* They move, in either time or space. If only I could find why they go, I might be able to work out the 'where.'"

"You like these critters, Joel?"

"Perhaps. Let's say I've become accustomed to them. I think sometimes they may be beginning to accept me as well. But I can't be sure. If there could be some understanding. …"

"I know," said Wolfe. "I know."

He turned from the cage and began to walk away. Strang walked with him for a short distance.

"No sign of Henderson?" he asked.

"Henderson is gone," Wolfe told him.

"Like Tuckerman?"

"I'm sure, like Tuckerman."

"Gil, will we ever know?"

"I can't answer that question," said Wolfe. "You realize, of course, how ridiculous our position is—how ridiculous it has been from the very start of Hourglass. It's as if someone had asked us to find out how to halt the sun, or make it stand still. Except that in the case of Hourglass they expect us to find out how to move through time. It was taken for granted that we needed time travel. They said, 'Well, let's get it, then.' So they set up a project and they called it Hourglass and they said to Hourglass: 'In another three hundred years or so we'll expect you to be traveling in time.'"

"We'll get it, Gil."

Wolfe reached out and clapped Strang on the shoulder.

"Thanks a lot," he said.

II

Wolfe walked out into the barnyard, into the sudden blast of sunlight that left him blinking, able to see only through the narrow slits of half-closed lids.

He smelled the hot dryness of summer, the combined smells of sleeping dust, of too-green leaves, of uncut hayfield, of old and peeling paint. He heard far off the cooing of a dove and from near at hand the dry rustle of sparrows' wings and realized that the cooing and the rustle did little more than emphasize the silence which lay across vast acres—acres cut off by security fence and security guards and deep official silence.

So they had set up Hourglass and they had kept it secret. They had insisted that no one must know what Hourglass was seeking, and when, and if, discovery came it must be kept under wraps. Beyond everything else, no one must know what time travel would be used for.

And for once they had played it smart. Hourglass had been set up on this ancient farm, set up quietly without the usual fanfare of brand new, gleaming buildings, or the sudden influx of a great army of governmental functionaries. It had started in low gear without rousing more than passing wonderment among the country folk, and since nothing of importance had leaked out workers on the project had been spared the necessity of furious denials.

That it had been done with so much imagination almost two centuries in the past, he thought, only served to underline the vast importance which had been attached to it from the first and the

equally stubborn determination that it remain a closely guarded official secret.

Wolfe saw the flicker of a white dress coming down the pathway from the house and knew that it was Nancy Foster, his secretary, come in search of him. Nancy was pretty and efficient and conscientious, and no matter where he went she always managed to run him down, and keep him sedulously at the job.

Nancy, he was certain, was an undercover agent for Security. But that was all right with him. He was just a slob doing as well as he could manage in a job that was too big for any one man, and Security could look him over with tests and charts any time Nancy gave the word.

He walked across the barnyard and saw that Nancy had stopped at the end of the brick walk, and was waiting for him. She was staying in the shade, and her face looked strained.

"Goff's up at the house," she said. "He has someone with him."

"Thanks, Nancy," said Wolfe. "I'll go right up."

"Is there something wrong, Gil?"

"I don't think so, Nancy. Why?"

"This man with Goff. I'm almost sure he's from Central."

Wolfe forced himself to laugh. "We don't pull them quite so big, Nancy. We're not that important."

"His name is Hughes," said Nancy. "Sidney Wadsworth Hughes." She giggled a little at the name.

"It almost rhymes," said Wolfe.

The sentry at the door was still standing stiff and straight, but his affability had not diminished. "Did you see the kittens, sir?" he asked.

"No," said Wolfe. "I didn't get around to it. I'll look in on them tomorrow."

"They're worth your while," the sentry told him without a quiver of expression.

Goff and Hughes were waiting for him in the office. Hughes, Wolfe saw, was a big man—definitely a polished sort of customer. Hardly the sort of person, Wolfe told himself, who could be easily worsted in an argument. Goff introduced them. "Hughes is from Central Security," he said.

Wolfe shook hands with Hughes, thinking—Nancy's a pretty damned good judge of character.

"I'll run along," said Goff. "I've got some work to do. When you're ready, give me a call, and I'll send around a car for you."

"Thank you, Goff," said Hughes. It was definitely a dismissal.

"Could I rustle up a drink for you?" asked Wolfe.

"Later, perhaps," said Hughes. "Right now you and I have a great deal to talk about."

There was something a little off-key about the start of the interview. It was too urgent, too taut to be dramatic, although there was a sense of drama in it. No good would come of it, thought Wolfe.

He wondered if it might be about Henderson. Henderson's disappearance was the only subject he could think of that could have brought a man from Central to his office. But Henderson was a closed book. Goff had done the kind of job that left no doubt of that. Every fact, every facet of the disappearance had been covered and investigated. The entire story—or as much of it as was ever likely to be known—was down in official black and white.

Hughes sat down ponderously in a chair, and placed his briefcase beside him.

"I understand that a man has disappeared," he said.

Wolfe nodded.

"Goff was telling me about it," said Hughes. "It checks with the Tuckerman affair."

"Goff is a good man," said Wolfe. It was skirting the edge of heresy, he knew, for a project head to praise his own security chief. But he just didn't give a damn. Hughes was turning out to be a shade too pompous.

"I didn't come here to talk about Henderson, however," said Hughes. "I came to tell you that we've found Tuckerman."

Wolfe straightened in his chair. He sat momentarily frozen, half by involuntary self-control—an almost innate determination not to show emotion—and half by the steel-cold realization that if what Hughes said was true a large segment of Hourglass' hope had just gone down the drain.

"But that's impossible," he said at last. "It doesn't make—" He was stopped by the half-smile on the face of the man opposite him.

"I shall qualify that," Hughes told him. "We didn't find Tuckerman *himself*. But we have his fingerprints, and we can reconstruct what must have happened. Some of it, at least."

Hughes paused for some reaction, but Wolfe remained rigidly silent. Finally Wolfe said. "Go ahead. You were talking about some fingerprints."

"We found his fingerprints on a hospital record," said Hughes, "dating from the year nineteen fifty-eight."

Wolfe sat hunched inside himself, feeling elation beginning to seep into his soul. He saw that Hughes was watching him, with the half-smile still on his lips—an expression of inner amusement that was not quite condescending, but very close to it.

"You are sure?" asked Wolfe. "Sure beyond any possibility of doubt?"

"We have satisfied ourselves."

Wolfe nodded. It seemed good enough. If Central was satisfied, it usually meant that any battle, any struggle to overcome difficulties, was nine-tenths won.

"He was taken to a hospital," continued Hughes, "because he'd been in some sort of brawl. He was badly cut up and for a time, according to the records, it seemed most unlikely that he would pull through."

"He did, however?"

"We can't be sure. He disappeared again." Hughes wasn't smiling now. "I'm afraid that Tuckerman must have given them some bad moments. He came in with no identity, and absolutely no recollection of a previous existence. So they tagged him John Doe, and waited. Even when he improved, and they could talk to him, he could remember nothing. They attributed the memory block to a crack in the head he'd received in the fight. There were no previous records of the man they could consult and it must have seemed incomprehensible to them that anyone his age—he was forty, wasn't he?"

"Yes," said Wolfe.

"It must have been hard for them to understand how a man of that time could have lived for forty years without being fingerprinted, or, at the very least, leaving some record of himself somewhere by which his identity could be traced. Then, on top of that, to have him disappear—straight out of a hospital bed without any warning at all."

"He moved through time again," said Wolfe. "He didn't like it there, so he just moved back. Have you looked for him again?"

Hughes shook his head. "What would be the use? We weren't looking for him this time—we just stumbled on him by accident. He time-jumped four hundred years, remember. How far would he go the second time? Fingerprints are the only really sure means of identification available to us in the past and the time range involving fingerprints is narrow. If he traveled even fifty years from nineteen fifty-eight he'd be lost to us irremediably."

"But he traveled in *time,"* said Wolfe. "That's the important thing. We know now it can be done."

"You haven't known before?"

"We had certain evidences," Wolfe told him. "We had certain working theories. But we have been shooting in the dark. We could not be completely sure."

"Even after two hundred years?"

"It hasn't been two hundred years."

"Well, all right, then. Almost two hundred years. For people who have been so unsure of themselves your reports, I must remark, have seemed extremely hopeful."

He looked steadily at Wolfe.

Wolfe experienced a sudden surge of anger and fought to hold it in check.

"You're forgetting," he said, "that Central assigned us a task that virtually everyone looked upon as almost a lost cause from the first. We went into Hourglass cold. We had nothing to go on beyond a few abstract philosophic concepts that didn't really mean a thing. We started on this project from scratch. Central should be satisfied if the job is done in a thousand years."

Hughes' manner had changed. There was more than a trace of anger in him, too, now—anger and unconcealed impatience.

"Much sooner than a thousand years," he said. "We must have it in a hundred—fifty would be better. I'm aware that it's a long-range program, but the time is running short. Our calculators tell us that. Plain common sense comes up with the same warning. The diplomatic situation is getting rather thick."

He paused for a moment as if he might be considering whether he should say what he had in mind. He leaned slightly forward, a deepening flush mounting up over his cheekbones.

"I can't stress this too strongly," he said, slowly. "You are the only people who can avert a war. I don't think I need to remind you how horrible such a war would be."

Wolfe closed his eyes and saw it in a flare of agony. It was mostly all bright and blinding light but there were a few tiny darker spots, the molten cores of planets exploding in destruction.

"The Pleiadean System is pressing us hard," said Hughes. "But they won't attack unless they can do so from a position of calculated strength. If we can hold our alliances, and gain new strength, there will be peace. After that, in another thousand years, we will have outstripped them and the danger will be past."

He ran his fingers through his thinning hair. "It's a matter of ethics and of morality," he said. "Early in our expansion we made a few mistakes. We know better now. We feel—"

"I know exactly what you feel," Wolfe told him, bitterly. "You feel that Earth can't be held accountable for its earlier mistakes. You feel that we've outgrown them. You feel we have a perfect right to go back in time to erase and patch them up."

His lips tightened. "Paradox has it all figured out just how it can be done in complete secrecy. You want to put hindsight to work, and there's only one really effective way you can do that. So—you throw it in our laps. You say to Hourglass: 'Now it's up to you. If you fail the entire federation goes down to utter defeat.' No—not just defeat. Total annihilation."

He rose slowly from his chair. "Hughes," he said, "it's a burden

Hourglass won't assume. We'll do everything we can to give you time travel. We'll strain every nerve and use our every resource. But we can't accept the broader implication of our failure. We'll not even accept the full responsibility for possible failure. In other words, Hughes, don't talk to me in that tone of voice."

Hughes also rose. "I don't know if I like your attitude," he said.

Wolfe shrugged. "You can have it as you wish. You can like it or lump it. It's immaterial to me. But don't try to put extra pressure on us. Don't try to jack us up. We have all the pressure that we need right here."

He reached for the phone. "I'll ask Goff to send up the car," he said.

He was throwing the man out and it wasn't a smart thing to do. But somehow, it didn't seem to matter.

The security phone answered. Without hesitation he put through his request for the car.

"Now how about that drink?" he asked.

Hughes was furious. He took a folder out of his briefcase and laid it on the desk. "There's the data on Tuckerman," he said to Wolfe. "I'll wait for the car outside."

Wolfe watched the man stalk out.

III

Wolfe had made an enemy, and gained no immediate advantage and his behavior had been foolish in the extreme. But he was determined to make Central understand that Hourglass did not need to be reminded of its purpose.

Hourglass knew its purpose and for almost two hundred years had tried to implement it in every possible way—running down blind alleys, barking up wrong trees, but never pausing for an instant in its search, never losing sight of its ultimate goal. Hourglass needed no pompous fool like Hughes to prod it on its way.

Central might be getting impatient, but there was nothing he could do about that. Central had waited for a long time but it would have to wait still longer.

Not very much longer, perhaps. Paradox had been completed almost fifty years ago and now everything was ready. Once time travel became more than a theoretical possibility Project Paradox could go into operation. But until that day came it couldn't move an inch.

And that's just too damn bad, said Wolfe, talking to himself. He sat down behind his desk and put his hands in front of him and clenched them tight together. Nerves, he told himself. We're all a bunch of

nerves.

Although he had denied it vehemently in his reply to Hughes, the urgency dominated and frightened him—the frantic urgency to head off the first galactic war in which Earth would be disastrously involved, and in all probability destroyed.

He tried to envision the outcome of such a war and failed. It would be far-ranging and fought out on a grand strategy, and was beyond the scientific comprehension of a man untrained in the military. Planets would take the place of cities in the old and now obsolete and outmoded concept of global war and would be blasted into nothingness as a mere tactical maneuver by one side or the other.

And it could be stopped. It could be made to never happen. Once time travel had been achieved, Paradox would proceed to implement the plan that it had all worked out and ready, could travel back through time to undo those things which were a dark and tragic blot upon Earth's diplomatic record. For the ideological struggle which was now in progress was a battle for the minds of many different planets. And that, Wolfe thought, must be a dilly of a job. For what might be considered correct thinking on one planet might be treason on another.

Wolfe suddenly found himself going over the Hourglass record of accomplishment point by point. It had the Telmont Evidences—the records found on an abandoned, long-dead planet out in the Sower System. Those invaluable tablets seemed to indicate that the race which had once occupied Sower III had made use of time travel to enrich and enlarge their daily lives. But there was a catch to it. Time travel had apparently been so much a matter of course with them that they had neglected to mention what kind of time travel it was.

Wolfe swore quietly to himself—remembering how frantically Hourglass had worked to break the written language of the Telmont people. And how, once the key had been found, the great abundance of existing inscriptions had been searched to no avail.

They had it, Wolfe thought, pounding his fist upon the desk top. What was it that they had? Mechanical process? Natural ability? Mental exercise? Or what?

And the Whitherers, brought back twenty years before from the Jigsaw area—what about the Whitherers? And the Munn equations—the work of a little shriveled gnome of a man who persisted in the insane, old-fashioned belief that everything in the universe could be explained by simple mathematics.

And now two men had disappeared!

There was work to do, he told himself. He should be up and at it, instead of sitting here speculating in bitter anger and frustration. But he didn't want to work.

He wanted to go fishing.

He sat and thought of the green slide of water, the darkness of the pools, the languor of the sunshine and the fascination of the bobbing float. There were sunnies and bluegills waiting for him and as quarry they were poor indeed. But they had therapeutic value and he wanted to go fishing.

By God, he thought, *I'll go. I'll sneak away from Nancy and all the rest of them and catch me a mess of fish.*

He got to his feet and put out his hand to pick up the file that Hughes had flung upon the desk. Tuckerman, he thought. How had it been with Antony Tuckerman on that October day of thirty years before.

Had he meant to leave, or had he met with some unforeseen, wholly inexplicable accident? What had he done to send himself tumbling back into the past? What had he done or seen or felt or thought? And what had happened to Sartwell Henderson just ten short days ago? What had Tuckerman and Henderson done that was unique, different? Why should something have happened to them that had happened to no one else on Earth?

And yet that wasn't exactly right!

How long, he wondered, can a man stay blind? He laid the folder back on the desk and was surprised and outraged to find that his hand was shaking.

He stood tensed for a moment, to give his hand a chance, and when it had stopped its shaking he picked up the phone and said to the operator, "Get me Central Information."

He waited and the voice came on.

"Wolfe, Hourglass," he said. "I shall want all the vital breakdown data that you have in your files on missing persons. Over the last ten years, let's say."

"It will take a little time, sir."

"Okay. Call me back when you've got it."

"You don't want the actual cases? Just the statistics and the distribution and the few more simple breakdowns?"

"Yes, naturally. It would take a dozen men a month to go over every report completely."

"Any detail you want us to pay particular attention to? If we knew your reason. …"

"No reason," said Wolfe. "Call it a passing whim."

"But, sir—"

"Damn it, can't you do just a simple research job without jacking it up into a priority production? Get me that data, and call me back when you have it."

He slammed down the phone and stamped out of the room.

When he reached the central hall he could hear Nancy quarreling with the cook. *Good Lord,* he thought, *can't she even keep her nose out of the kitchen? That's a first-rate cook she's insulting. If she runs him off with her bossiness—*

He went out behind the barn that housed the Whitherers, and took down the long cane pole from its place beneath the eaves. But when he looked for the spade he couldn't find it. He cursed fluently and, still grumbling, found an old soup can and headed for the orchard. Driven to it, he told himself he could dig enough worms for an hour or two of fishing with his bare hands and, perhaps, a handy stick.

Under the favorite apple tree he found the missing spade. It was attached to a little gnome-like man who had leaned a fishing pole against the tree and was now strenuously engaged in digging worms.

"Hello, Doc," said Wolfe.

Dr. Oscar Munn took one indignant look at him and flung down the spade.

"I quit," cried Munn. "I'm resigning from the project right here and now."

He started to walk back toward the barns, but Wolfe stepped quickly in front of him. Munn halted inches away, with his bristling, ridiculous little beard pointed directly at Wolfe's chest.

"What's eating you, Doc?" Wolfe demanded.

"The figures," said Munn fiercely. "They simply would not march. They refused to stay in straight lines. They went around in circles. So I decided to go fishing for a while and clear away the cobwebs. But the minute I get there the place is crowded."

"You'd rather I didn't go fishing today, Doc?"

"You can do anything you want," said Munn, "just so long as you don't insist on doing it with me."

"You're a man of great discernment," Wolfe told him, "and I admire you for it. I'm no fit companion. I've been snapping at everyone all day."

"So have I," conceded Munn.

"What's the matter with us, Doc?"

"We don't go fishing half enough," said Munn. "Not nearly half enough. Let's get at those worms."

"You've dug your share," said Wolfe. "I will do the rest."

"I'll pick them up," Munn offered. "It takes an agile angleworm to get away from me."

Wolfe picked up the spade and plunged it in the ground. "I just had a brainstorm, Doc."

"So," said Munn.

"I called up Central Information and asked for a missing persons

breakdown."

Munn grunted. "How long have you been here, Gil?"

"I don't see what that's got to do with it? Five years, if you must know."

Munn chuckled. "It's been done before," he said. "About every five years or so someone gets a brainstorm. You just missed the last one."

Wolfe turned over a spade full of dirt and Munn dived into it like a wrathful terrier. He garnered four large worms, two small ones and one that had been sliced in half.

"So I was a fool to do it," said Wolfe.

"Not a fool," Munn told him.

"Maybe I should call back and stop them."

"Would you break their hearts?" asked Munn. "Would you show disrespect for that great encyclopedic setup with all the lovely push-buttons and all the files arranged so neatly?"

"I suppose I should let them have their fun," decided Wolfe.

"Turn the ground again," said Munn. "Let us get on with our worm gathering. And no more talk of shop."

"I was just going to tell you. They found Tuckerman."

Munn looked up quickly from where he squatted by the shovel full of earth. "They found him! Then that means—"

"It means exactly what we had hoped. They found his fingerprints, dating back to the year nineteen fifty-eight."

Munn picked up a handful of dirt and let it trickle through his fingers.

"Someday," he said. "Someday we'll get it. It will happen to someone else—to you, perhaps, or to me. And when it does we will be quick-witted enough to leave a clue behind for Joel, or some other bright young lad to follow."

He squatted, musing. "We approach it from so many different angles largely because we are not sure—because we do not know exactly what we are searching for. I wonder if Tuckerman or Henderson. …" Munn made a gesture of impatience. "Turn the shovel, please."

IV

The sun had disappeared behind the trees on the hill across the meadow when Dr. Munn and Wolfe called it a day. They wound the lines around the poles, stuck the hooks into the floats and started for the house.

Munn's eyes kept returning to the catch. "Best day all summer,"

he said. “Now we can go back, and the figures and our thinking will be straight.”

They sneaked around to the back of the house and left the fish with the cook, who cursed mightily because he could see at a glance that a one-hour cleaning job lay ahead of him.

Nancy was waiting for them in the living room, her cheeks flushed, her eyes angry and accusing.

“Where have you been all afternoon?” she demanded. “Central Information has been calling you.”

Wolfe gave a guilty start. He’d forgotten all about Central Information. “Thanks,” he said, deciding there was no need to give her a detailed explanation.

He went into the office and closed the door, leaving Munn to Nancy’s seldom completely tender mercy.

Central Information made no attempt to disguise its exasperation. “We’ve been trying to get you all afternoon,” a reproachful voice said.

“I got tied up,” Wolfe explained.

“We have the information which you requested. Could we put it on the screen?”

Wolfe pushed the button for the vision plate, and the square lit up. A graph appeared upon it, neatly executed.

“We became intensely interested once we got into it,” Information told him. “You asked for a ten-year breakdown, but we went back fifty years. You will note the steady rise in disappearances, year by year. It is significant.”

“Significant of what?” asked Wolfe.

“Why, I wouldn’t know exactly. But there must be some significance. You will note the …”

“Thanks for calling it to my attention,” said Wolfe, grinning at having caught a busybody completely off base.

“There was something else,” said Information. “We just stumbled on it by accident. But it was so striking that we made up a graph for it as well.”

The first graph with its steadily ascending curve disappeared and was replaced by another which showed a steadily declining curve.

“This,” said Information, “shows the decrease in insanity over the same period of time. There probably is no relation between the two graphs, but if you will kindly note…”

The screen changed again and showed the two charts side by side.

“…if you will kindly note, the ascending and descending lines match almost perfectly.”

“I am extremely pleased,” said Wolfe, irritated beyond all reason, “to have my request supplemented by this astounding example of your enthusiastic research.”

“Thank you,” said the fatuous voice. “We felt you might be interested in such an unusual situation.”

“And what would you deduce from it, precisely? That persons who become insane run off immediately and lose themselves or—well, perhaps you have something even more startling to suggest.”

“We made no deduction, sir,” said the voice. “Our sole purpose is to provide requested data.”

“Which you have done most nobly,” said Wolfe, “far beyond the call of duty.”

But even as he mocked, he felt the first stir of excitement rising in his brain.

“We will send you all the data,” said Information, “by mail immediately. By special messenger, if you wish.”

“Special messenger, by all means,” said Wolfe, “and thank you very much.”

He replaced the receiver and sat stiffly in the dim light of the room.

Could the fatuous fools have stumbled onto something? Could there be some connection between the disappearances and insanity? Was there some significance in the fact that while the disappearances had steadily increased, insanity had waned? The two charts showed a direct relationship—but could the charts be trusted?

He sat there, thinking back across the years—his years on the project and all the other years before—when it had seemed that all reason and all human experience was against the project, that it would come to nothing and finally perish in the dust alongside the other vanities of Man. The long hard years of nothing and, at times, of worse than nothing—when hope itself seemed dead. And the lean years of frustration when the Telmont Evidences seemed to suggest that the project’s aim was far from hopeless, but did not point the way.

And finally, the years of fitful wonder, with the Whitherers watching impudently with their staring, sphinx-like eyes, while they did perhaps the very thing that man had tried and failed for two centuries to do—did it with no more thought or effort than a human might take in walking through a door from one room to another.

Was it then a natural ability rather than a formula which could be reduced to mathematics—a philosophic concept, the clever manipulation of universal factors? Was it something that might hide within Man’s brain, a latent ability late in developing, even unsuspected?

Suppose, Wolfe thought, just suppose—

Suppose that the disappearances were a safety valve precisely as insanity was a safety valve. Suppose that Man, after many centuries,

had finally developed a better safety valve. Suppose that instead of going insane, a man, tormented beyond endurance by his problems, sought escape by going back through time. And suppose he discovered then that his problems had ceased to exist, since the circumstances which had created them had been swept away, and no longer had any real existence in time.

If that were true, then you'd have exactly what the graphs had shown—fewer cases of insanity, and more disappearance cases. And it made considerable sense, too, Wolfe told himself. It certainly made as much sense as insanity could ever make. Perhaps more sense, for insanity was a total waste, while a person who disappeared in time would still retain his own unique personality and his humanity.

Survival, he thought. It could be a survival factor. It could be something that was developing, under the press of circumstance, when the human race needed it desperately.

And if he was on the right track at last it would open up new avenues of research. You couldn't, on the face of it, drive a man insane in order to push him into time, but there would be other means. And if it proved to be an ability innate within the mind, it was something that would eventually belong to the entire human race and would be the exact opposite of a piece of property that could be auctioned off to the highest bidder.

He felt shaken, but he was no longer tense. He got up from his desk and walked toward the door. But before he had taken five steps the portal burst open and Goff plunged into the room, gripping a frightened, elderly man by both elbows and propelling him forward. Goff had lost his cap and his hair was rumpled, his face convulsed with rage.

Behind Goff and the stranger were Munn, Nancy and the cook, with a look of scared wonder on their faces.

V

Goff gave the stranger a shove that sent him reeling out into the center of the room.

"I found him skulking by the barns," he said, his voice shaking with anger. "He won't answer questions. He pretends he doesn't know how he got here. He keeps mumbling all the time about how bright everything is."

The man turned slowly around to face them and for the first time Wolfe saw that his lips were ashen, his eyes glazed, filmed over with what appeared to be fright.

"It was all bright," he stammered. "The sky—like the sun!"

Wolfe said calmly, “Won’t you have a chair, please?”

The man hesitated, the dazed look deepening in his eyes.

“That one over there,” said Wolfe.

The man shambled to Wolfe’s desk, and sat down.

“He’s either crazy,” said Goff, “or he’s putting on an act.”

Nancy had shut the door and was standing with her back against it, her eyes very wide. “That’s a funny suit he’s wearing,” she said.

“He’s a funny man,” said Goff, disgusted.

Wolfe walked toward the chair and the man cringed away from him. “You needn’t be afraid,” Wolfe told him. “I am glad that you are here.”

“How could he have gotten in?” Goff asked angrily. “No one could have climbed that fence—and the radar hasn’t shown a thing.”

“I think I know,” said Wolfe. “I think I know *exactly* how he did it.”

And if what he believed was true, he told himself, Hourglass was a failure.

“So it was bright,” Wolfe said.

The man nodded. His jaw muscles had begun to twitch spasmodically. “We weren’t soon enough,” he muttered. “I’m sorry.”

“What year was it, friend?” asked Wolfe.

The man seemed not to hear.

“What year was it, man? We’ve got to know. What date did the Pleiadeans attack?”

“Just a minute or so ago,” said the man. “December twenty-ninth, twenty five, ninety-five.”

“There’s your answer, Goff,” said Wolfe, without turning, still looking at the man.

Goff protested angrily. “He doesn’t know what he’s saying.”

“Yes, he does,” said Wolfe. “Hourglass was a failure. We never found time travel. Not the way we meant to find it. The people found it, but we didn’t—”

“It was white bright,” wailed the man. “It was far off and bright, and it moved so fast it covered all the sky. Then I—found myself here.”

Wolfe stood stiffly by the chair, imagining once again what it would be like—the sudden blaze of brightness and the darker masses that were fragments of a shattered planet suddenly turned molten.

But there would be an instant, just before the terror hit and death closed down when there might be time enough—time enough to trigger within the brains of men this new, developing, last-minute safety valve.

A survival factor, he had told himself, and here was evidence, proof, of its existence—a survival factor against the day when there

would be no time to run and no place to hide.

And Hourglass was a failure, he thought. What would happen now?

As if aware of his thoughts, Nancy crossed and stood beside him, looking at the man huddled in the chair.

"We'd better get him into bed," she said. "He's close to shock. Cook, have you got some soup?"

"Right away," said the cook, ducking out the door.

"Give me a hand, Doc," said Goff.

Wolfe stepped to one side and watched the two of them help the man to his feet and walk him down the hall.

Nancy tugged at his sleeve. "What does it all mean, Gil?"

"It means we've failed," said Wolfe. "It means we have as an innate faculty within us the ability to travel in time, but have failed to develop, soon enough, techniques for controlling it. We can go tumbling past-ward, perhaps even future-ward, but all we shall ever do is tumble. We can't ourselves determine when or where. It's still purely a random manifestation of what is perhaps the most powerful force in the physical universe."

"Then there will be war!"

"There is war now," Wolfe told her, grimly. "Some two hundred years in the future Earth has been blasted into a glowing cinder by a total conversion bomb."

"Meow," said Molly, the cat.

Wolfe jerked up his head. Molly stood in the doorway, as disreputable as ever, politely waiting to be invited in.

"Hello, Molly," Nancy greeted her. "How is the family?"

Molly waltzed across the floor, her proud tail erect and waving. Muttering little conversational purrs and yowls, she rubbed against Wolfe's trouser-leg.

"You shouldn't roam about all night," he told her, stroking her chin. "Do you want that big rabbit in the woodpile to sneak up, and grab you?"

Molly didn't seem disturbed by the thought. She closed her eyes and purred.

"She should start being careful soon," said Nancy. "She has only four lives left."

"Four lives left?" asked Wolfe. "Oh, sure, I forgot. A cat has nine."

He stared at Nancy for a moment, then down at Molly. "Good Lord," he said. "I never thought of it."

"Of Molly's lives?" asked Nancy.

"No, not that at all. Don't you see—we have the same situation here. We went ahead and we failed. But now at least one person from the final hours of Hourglass and the Earth has come back to us and he

may not be the last. So we start again, with the help of those returning men and women, and we go ahead once more. This time, because of our increased knowledge, we may make it. But even if we fail again, there'll be others returning after every setback, and Hourglass can make a fresh start and eventually a time will come…"

He rubbed a hand hard against his face. "I don't know. I don't know. Doc will have to check it. I'm not completely sure, by any means. There are so many questions still to be answered. Are there many alternative futures, or must our one future be correct, precisely as we planned to correct the past?"

"But you really believe," said Nancy, "that we shall have a second chance."

"And a third, a fourth and a fifth," said Wolfe. "More—if we should need them. If it holds true the first time, it should hold true again and again."

The phone was ringing now. Wolfe stepped to the desk and picked it up.

"This is Hughes," an angry voice said.

"How are you, Mr. Hughes?"

"What's going on?" demanded Hughes. "We're being flooded with reports from all parts of the world about strangers showing up. There are thousands of them. They say they're from the *future!"*

"They're refugees," said Wolfe.

"This is one you're pegged with," Hughes raged at him. "This is squarely in your lap."

Wolfe slammed the receiver down so forcefully that it bounced.

The guard had quitted his post, and was fidgeting at the door.

"There are three men out here, sir," he said. "They seem to be confused.'

"Send them in," said Wolfe. "I've been expecting them."

The guard was hesitant.

Wolfe lost his temper then.

"Get them in!" he almost shouted. "We have work to do!"

The guard turned and went down the hall.

It was all right, Wolfe thought.

He was tied up in knots again.

A Death in the House

I have often suggested that the quintessential Clifford D. Simak story is one in which the alien comes to ordinary people; but this is not one of those stories, because old Mose Abrams is not "ordinary people"—in fact, most of the ordinary people around him think he's strange. Nonetheless, Cliff's portrait of Mose is utterly compelling and unforgettable, and I find it tantalizing that any journal Cliff might have had for 1959 does not survive, and that, for that reason, the only note I've found regarding what I'm sure is this story is a brief entry from the 1958 journal, in which Cliff states, on December 26, that he "got started on story about the alien who rose from death."

This story was originally published in the October 1959, issue of Galaxy Science Fiction.

—dww

Old Mose Abrams was out hunting cows when he found the alien. He didn't know it was an alien, but it was alive and it was in a lot of trouble and Old Mose, despite everything the neighbors said about him, was not the kind of man who could bear to leave a sick thing out there in the woods.

It was a horrid-looking thing, green and shiny, with some purple spots on it, and it was repulsive even twenty feet away. And it stank.

It had crawled, or tried to crawl, into a clump of hazel brush, but hadn't made it. The head part was in the brush and the rest lay out there naked in the open. Every now and then the parts that seemed to be arms and hands clawed feebly at the ground, trying to force itself deeper in the brush, but it was too weak; it never moved an inch.

It was groaning, too, but not too loud—just the kind of keening sound a lonesome wind might make around a wide, deep eave. But there was more in it than just the sound of winter wind; there was a frightened, desperate note that made the hair stand up on Old Mose's nape.

Old Mose stood there for quite a spell, making up his mind what he ought to do about it, and a while longer after that working up his courage, although most folks offhand would have said that he had plenty. But this was the sort of situation that took more than just ordinary screwed-up courage. It took a lot of foolhardiness.

But this was a wild, hurt thing and he couldn't leave it there, so he walked up to it, and knelt down, and it was pretty hard to look at, though there was a sort of fascination in its repulsiveness that was

hard to figure out—as if it were so horrible that it dragged one to it. And it stank in a way that no one had ever smelled before.

Mose, however, was not finicky. In the neighborhood, he was not well known for fastidity. Ever since his wife had died almost ten years before, he had lived alone on his untidy farm and the housekeeping that he did was the scandal of all the neighbor women. Once a year, if he got around to it, he sort of shoveled out the house, but the rest of the year he just let things accumulate.

So he wasn't as upset as some might have been with the way the creature smelled. But the sight of it upset him, and it took him quite a while before he could bring himself to touch it. And when he finally did, he was considerably surprised. He had been prepared for it to be either cold or slimy, or maybe even both. But it was neither. It was warm and hard and it had a clean feel to it, and he was reminded of the way a green corn stalk would feel.

He slid his hand beneath the hurt thing and pulled it gently from the clump of hazel brush and turned it over so he could see its face. It hadn't any face. It had an enlargement at the top of it, like a flower on top of a stalk, although its body wasn't any stalk, and there was a fringe around this enlargement that wiggled like a can of worms, and it was then that Mose almost turned around and ran.

But he stuck it out.

He squatted there, staring at the no-face with the fringe of worms, and he got cold all over and his stomach doubled up on him and he was stiff with fright—and the fright got worse when it seemed to him that the keening of the thing was coming from the worms.

Mose was a stubborn man. One had to be stubborn to run a runty farm like his. Stubborn and insensitive in a lot of ways. But not insensitive, of course, to a thing in pain.

Finally he was able to pick it up and hold it in his arms and there was nothing to it, for it didn't weigh much. Less than a half-grown shoat, he figured.

He went up the woods path with it, heading back for home, and it seemed to him the smell of it was less. He was hardly scared at all and he was warm again and not cold all over.

For the thing was quieter now and keening just a little. And although he could not be sure of it, there were times when it seemed as if the thing were snuggling up to him, the way a scared and hungry baby will snuggle to any grown person that comes and picks it up.

Old Mose reached the buildings and he stood out in the yard a minute, wondering whether he should take it to the barn or house. The barn, of course, was the natural place for it, for it wasn't human—it wasn't even as close to human as a dog or cat or sick lamb would be.

He didn't hesitate too long, however. He took it into the house and laid it on what he called a bed, next to the kitchen stove. He got it straightened out all neat and orderly and pulled a dirty blanket over it, and then went to the stove and stirred up the fire until there was some flame.

Then he pulled up a chair beside the bed and had a good, hard, wondering look at this thing he had brought home. It had quieted down a lot and seemed more comfortable than it had out in the woods. He tucked the blanket snug around it with a tenderness that surprised himself. He wondered what he had that it might eat, and even if he knew, how he'd manage feeding it, for it seemed to have no mouth.

"But you don't need to worry none," he told it. "Now that I got you under a roof, you'll be all right. I don't know too much about it, but I'll take care of you the best I can."

By now it was getting on toward evening, and he looked out the window and saw that the cows he had been hunting had come home by themselves.

"I got to go get the milking done and the other chores," he told the thing lying on the bed, "but it won't take me long. I'll be right back."

Old Mose loaded up the stove so the kitchen would stay warm and he tucked the thing in once again, then got his milk pails and went down to the barn.

He fed the sheep and pigs and horses and he milked the cows. He hunted eggs and shut the chicken house. He pumped a tank of water.

Then he went back to the house.

It was dark now and he lit the oil lamp on the table, for he was against electricity. He'd refused to sign up when REA had run out the line and a lot of the neighbors had gotten sore at him for being uncooperative. Not that he cared, of course.

He had a look at the thing upon the bed. It didn't seem to be any better, or any worse, for that matter. If it had been a sick lamb or an ailing calf, he could have known right off how it was getting on, but this thing was different. There was no way to tell.

He fixed himself some supper and ate it and wished he knew how to feed the thing. And he wished, too, that he knew how to help it. He'd got it under shelter and he had it warm, but was that right or wrong for something like this? He had no idea.

He wondered if he should try to get some help, then felt squeamish about asking help when he couldn't say exactly what had to be helped. But then he wondered how he would feel himself if he were in a far, strange country, all played out and sick, and no one to get him any help because they didn't know exactly what he was.

That made up his mind for him and he walked over to the phone. But should he call a doctor or a veterinarian? He decided to call the doctor because the thing was in the house. If it had been in the barn, he would have called the veterinarian.

He was on a rural line and the hearing wasn't good and he was halfway deaf, so he didn't use the phone too often. He had told himself at times it was nothing but another aggravation and there had been a dozen times he had threatened to have it taken out. But now he was glad he hadn't.

The operator got old Doctor Benson and they couldn't hear one another too well, but Mose finally made the doctor understand who was calling and that he needed him and the doctor said he'd come.

With some relief, Mose hung up the phone and was just standing there, not doing anything, when he was struck by the thought that there might be others of these things down there in the woods. He had no idea what they were or what they might be doing or where they might be going, but it was pretty evident that the one upon the bed was some sort of stranger from a very distant place. It stood to reason that there might be more than one of them, for far traveling was a lonely business and anyone—or anything—would like to have some company along.

He got the lantern down off the peg and lit it and went stumping out the door. The night was as black as a stack of cats and the lantern light was feeble, but that made not a bit of difference, for Mose knew this farm of his like the back of his hand.

He went down the path into the woods. It was a spooky place, but it took more than woods at night to spook Old Mose. At the place where he had found the thing, he looked around, pushing through the brush and holding the lantern high so he could see a bigger area, but he didn't find another one of them.

He did find something else, though—a sort of outsize birdcage made of metal lattice work that had wrapped itself around an eight-inch hickory tree. He tried to pull it loose, but it was jammed so tight that he couldn't budge it.

He sighted back the way it must have come. He could see where it had plowed its way through the upper branches of the trees, and out beyond were stars, shining bleakly with the look of far away.

Mose had no doubt that the thing lying on his bed beside the kitchen stove had come in this birdcage contraption. He marveled some at that, but he didn't fret himself too much, for the whole thing was so unearthly that he knew he had little chance of pondering it out.

He walked back to the house and he scarcely had the lantern blown out and hung back on its peg than he heard a car drive up.

The doctor, when he came up to the door, became a little grumpy at seeing Old Mose standing there.

"You don't look sick to me," the doctor said. "Not sick enough to drag me clear out here at night."

"I ain't sick," said Mose.

"Well, then," said the doctor, more grumpily than ever, "what do you mean by phoning me?"

"I got someone who is sick," said Mose. "I hope you can help him. I would have tried myself, but I don't know how to go about it."

The doctor came inside and Mose shut the door behind him.

"You got something rotten in here?" asked the doctor.

"No, it's just the way he smells. It was pretty bad at first, but I'm getting used to it by now."

The doctor saw the thing lying on the bed and went over to it. Old Mose heard him sort of gasp and could see him standing there, very stiff and straight. Then he bent down and had a good look at the critter on the bed.

When he straightened up and turned around to Mose, the only thing that kept him from being downright angry was that he was so flabbergasted.

"Mose," he yelled, "what *is* this?"

"I don't know," said Mose. "I found it in the woods and it was hurt and wailing and I couldn't leave it there."

"You think it's sick?"

"I know it is," said Mose. "It needs help awful bad. I'm afraid it's dying."

The doctor turned back to the bed again and pulled the blanket down, then went and got the lamp so that he could see. He looked the critter up and down, and he prodded it with a skittish finger, and he made the kind of mysterious clucking sound that only doctors make.

Then he pulled the blanket back over it again and took the lamp back to the table.

"Mose," he said. "I can't do a thing for it."

"But you're a doctor!"

"A human doctor, Mose. I don't know what this thing is, but it isn't human. I couldn't even guess what is wrong with it, if anything. And I wouldn't know what could be safely done for it even if I could diagnose its illness. I'm not even sure it's an animal. There are a lot of things about it that argue it's a plant."

Then the doctor asked Mose straight out how he came to find it and Mose told him exactly how it happened. But he didn't tell him anything about the birdcage, for when he thought about it, it sounded so fantastic that he couldn't bring himself to tell it. Just finding the critter and having it here was bad enough, without throwing in the

birdcage.

"I tell you what," the doctor said. "You got something here that's outside all human knowledge. I doubt there's ever been a thing like this seen on Earth before. I have no idea what it is and I wouldn't try to guess. If I were you, I'd get in touch with the university up at Madison. There might be someone there who could get it figured out. Even if they couldn't they'd be interested. They'd want to study it."

Mose went to the cupboard and got the cigar box almost full of silver dollars and paid the doctor. The doctor put the dollars in his pocket, joshing Mose about his eccentricity.

But Mose was stubborn about his silver dollars. "Paper money don't seem legal, somehow," he declared. "I like the feel of silver and the way it clinks. It's got authority."

The doctor left and he didn't seem as upset as Mose had been afraid he might be. As soon as he was gone, Mose pulled up a chair and sat down beside the bed.

It wasn't right, he thought, that the thing should be so sick and no one to help—no one who knew any way to help it.

He sat in the chair and listened to the ticking of the clock, loud in the kitchen silence, and the crackling of the wood burning in the stove.

Looking at the thing lying on the bed, he had an almost fierce hope that it could get well again and stay with him. Now that its birdcage was all banged up, maybe there'd be nothing it could do but stay. And he hoped it would, for already the house felt less lonely.

Sitting in the chair between the stove and bed, Mose realized how lonely it had been. It had not been quite so bad until Towser died. He had tried to bring himself to get another dog, but he never had been able to. For there was no dog that would take the place of Towser and it had seemed unfaithful to even try. He could have gotten a cat, of course, but that would remind him too much of Molly; she had been very fond of cats, and until the time she died, there had always been two or three of them underfoot around the place.

But now he was alone. Alone with his farm and his stubbornness and his silver dollars. The doctor thought, like all the rest of them, that the only silver Mose had was in the cigar box in the cupboard. There wasn't one of them who knew about the old iron kettle piled plumb full of them, hidden underneath the floor boards of the living room. He chuckled at the thought of how he had them fooled. He'd give a lot to see his neighbors' faces if they could only know. But he was not the one to tell them. If they were to find it out, they'd have to find it out themselves.

He nodded in the chair and finally he slept, sitting upright, with his chin resting on his chest and his crossed arms wrapped around

himself as if to keep him warm.

When he woke, in the dark before the dawn, with the lamp flickering on the table and the fire in the stove burned low, the alien had died.

There was no doubt of death. The thing was cold and rigid and the husk that was its body was rough and drying out—as a corn stalk in the field dries out, whipping in the wind once the growing had been ended.

Mose pulled the blanket up to cover it, and although this was early to do the chores, he went out by lantern light and got them done.

After breakfast, he heated water and washed his face and shaved, and it was the first time in years he'd shaved any day but Sunday.

Then he put on his one good suit and slicked down his hair and got the old jalopy out of the machine shed and drove into town.

He hunted up Eb Dennison, the town clerk, who also was the secretary of the cemetery association.

"Eb," he said, "I want to buy a lot."

"But you've got a lot," protested Eb.

"That plot," said Mose, "is a family plot. There's just room for me and Molly."

"Well, then," asked Eb, "why another one? You have no other members of the family."

"I found someone in the woods," said Mose. "I took him home and he died last night. I plan to bury him."

"If you found a dead man in the woods," Eb warned him, "you better notify the coroner and sheriff."

"In time I may," said Mose, not intending to. "Now how about that plot?"

Washing his hands of the affair entirely, Eb sold him the plot.

Having bought his plot, Mose went to the undertaking establishment run by Albert Jones.

"Al," he said, "there's been a death out at the house. A stranger I found out in the woods. He doesn't seem to have anyone and I aim to take care of it."

"You got a death certificate?" asked Al, who subscribed to none of the niceties affected by most funeral parlor operators.

"Well, no, I haven't."

"Was there a doctor in attendance?"

"Doc Benson came out last night."

"He should have made you out one. I'll give him a ring."

He phoned Doctor Benson and talked with him a while and got red around the gills. He finally slammed down the phone and turned on Mose.

"I don't know what you're trying to pull off," he fumed, "but Doc tells me this thing of yours isn't even human. I don't take care of dogs or cats or—"

"This ain't no dog or cat."

"I don't care what it is. It's got to be human for me to handle it. And don't go trying to bury it in the cemetery, because it's against the law."

Considerably discouraged, Mose left the undertaking parlor and trudged slowly up the hill toward the town's one and only church.

He found the minister in his study working on a sermon. Mose sat down in a chair and fumbled his battered hat around and around in his work-scarred hands.

"Parson," he said, "I'll tell you the story from first to last," and he did. He added, "I don't know what it is. I guess no one else does, either. But it's dead and in need of decent burial and that's the least that I can do. I can't bury it in the cemetery, so I suppose I'll have to find a place for it on the farm. I wonder if you could bring yourself to come out and say a word or two."

The minister gave the matter some deep consideration.

"I'm sorry, Mose," he said at last. "I don't believe I can. I am not sure at all the church would approve of it."

"This thing may not be human," said Old Mose, "but it is one of God's critters."

The minister thought some more, and did some wondering out loud, but made up his mind finally that he couldn't do it.

So Mose went down the Street to where his car was waiting and drove home, thinking about what heels some humans are.

Back at the farm again, he got a pick and shovel and went into the garden, and there, in one corner of it, he dug a grave. He went out to the machine shed to hunt up some boards to make the thing a casket, but it turned out that he had used the last of the lumber to patch up the hog pen.

Mose went to the house and dug around in a chest in one of the back rooms which had not been used for years, hunting for a sheet to use as a winding shroud, since there would be no casket. He couldn't find a sheet, but he did unearth an old white linen table cloth. He figured that would do, so he took it to the kitchen.

He pulled back the blanket and looked at the critter lying there in death and a sort of lump came into his throat at the thought of it—how it had died so lonely and so far from home without a creature of its own to spend its final hours with. And naked, too, without a stitch of clothing and with no possession, with not a thing to leave behind as a remembrance of itself.

He spread the table cloth out on the floor beside the bed and

lifted the thing and laid it on the table cloth. As he laid it down, he saw the pocket in it—if it was a pocket—a sort of slitted flap in the center of what could be its chest. He ran his hand across the pocket area. There was a lump inside it. He crouched for a long moment beside the body, wondering what to do.

Finally he reached his fingers into the flap and took out the thing that bulged. It was a ball, a little bigger than a tennis ball, made of cloudy glass—or, at least, it looked like glass. He squatted there, staring at it, then took it to the window for a better look.

There was nothing strange at all about the ball. It was just a cloudy ball of glass and it had a rough, dead feel about it, just as the body had.

He shook his head and took it back and put it where he'd found it and wrapped the body securely in the cloth. He carried it to the garden and put it in the grave. Standing solemnly at the head of the grave, he said a few short words and then shoveled in the dirt.

He had meant to make a mound above the grave and he had intended to put up a cross, but at the last he didn't do either one of these. There would be snoopers. The word would get around and they'd be coming out and hunting for the spot where he had buried this thing he had found out in the woods. So there must be no mound to mark the place and no cross as well. Perhaps it was for the best, he told himself, for what could he have carved or written on the cross?

By this time it was well past noon and he was getting hungry, but he didn't stop to eat, because there were other things to do. He went out into the pasture and caught up Bess and hitched her to the stoneboat and went down into the woods.

He hitched her to the birdcage that was wrapped around the tree and she pulled it loose as pretty as you please. Then he loaded it on the stoneboat and hauled it up the hill and stowed it in the back of the machine shed, in the far corner by the forge.

After that, he hitched Bess to the garden plow and gave the garden a cultivating that it didn't need so it would be fresh dirt all over and no one could locate where he'd dug the grave.

He was just finishing the plowing when Sheriff Doyle drove up and got out of the car. The sheriff was a soft-spoken man, but he was no dawdler. He got right to the point.

"I hear," he said, "you found something in the woods."

"That I did," said Mose.

"I hear it died on you."

"Sheriff, you heard right."

"I'd like to see it, Mose."

"Can't. I buried it. And I ain't telling where."

"Mose," the sheriff said, "I don't want to make you trouble, but

you did an illegal thing. You can't go finding people in the woods and just bury them when they up and die on you."

"You talk to Doc Benson?"

The sheriff nodded. "He said it wasn't any kind of thing he'd ever seen before. He said it wasn't human."

"Well, then," said Mose, "I guess that lets you out. If it wasn't human, there could be no crime against a person. And if it wasn't owned, there ain't any crime against property. There's been no one around to claim they owned the thing, is there?"

The sheriff rubbed his chin. "No, there hasn't. Maybe you're right. Where did you study law?"

"I never studied law. I never studied anything. I just use common sense."

"Doc said something about the folks up at the university might want a look at it."

"I tell you, Sheriff," said Mose. "This thing came here from somewhere and it died. I don't know where it came from and I don't know what it was and I don't hanker none to know. To me it was just a living thing that needed help real bad. It was alive and it had its dignity and in death it commanded some respect. When the rest of you refused it decent burial, I did the best I could. And that is all there is to it."

"All right, Mose," the sheriff said, "if that's how you want it."

He turned around and stalked back to the car. Mose stood beside old Bess hitched to her plow and watched him drive away. He drove fast and reckless as if he might be angry.

Mose put the plow away and turned the horse back to the pasture and by now it was time to do chores again.

He got the chores all finished and made himself some supper and after supper sat beside the stove, listening to the ticking of the clock, loud in the silent house, and the crackle of the fire.

All night long the house was lonely.

The next afternoon, as he was plowing corn, a reporter came and walked up the row with him and talked with him when he came to the end of the row. Mose didn't like this reporter much. He was too flip and he asked some funny questions, so Mose clammed up and didn't tell him much.

A few days later, a man showed up from the university and showed him the story the reporter had gone back and written. The story made fun of Mose.

"I'm sorry." the professor said. "These newspapermen are unaccountable. I wouldn't worry too much about anything they write."

"I don't," Mose told him.

The man from the university asked a lot of questions and made quite a point about how important it was that he should see the body.

But Mose only shook his head. “It’s at peace,” he said. “I aim to leave it that way.”

The man went away disgusted, but still quite dignified.

For several days there were people driving by and dropping in, the idly curious, and there were some neighbors Mose hadn’t seen for months. But he gave them all short shrift and in a little while they left him alone and he went on with his farming and the house stayed lonely.

He thought again that maybe he should get a dog, but he thought of Towser and he couldn’t do it.

One day, working in the garden, he found the plant that grew out of the grave. It was a funny-looking plant and his first impulse was to root it out.

But he didn’t do it, for the plant intrigued him. It was a kind he’d never seen before and he decided he would let it grow, for a while at least, to see what kind it was. It was a bulky, fleshy plant, with heavy, dark-green, curling leaves, and it reminded him in some ways of the skunk cabbage that burgeoned in the woods come spring.

There was another visitor, the queerest of the lot. He was a dark and intense man who said he was the president of a flying saucer club. He wanted to know if Mose had talked with the thing he’d found out in the woods and seemed terribly disappointed when Mose told him he hadn’t. He wanted to know if Mose had found a vehicle the creature might have traveled in and Mose lied to him about it. He was afraid, the wild way the man was acting, that he might demand to search the place, and if he had, he’d likely have found the birdcage hidden in the machine shed back in the corner by the forge. But the man got to lecturing Mose about withholding vital information.

Finally Mose had taken all he could of it, so he stepped into the house and picked up the shotgun from behind the door. The president of the flying saucer club said good-by rather hastily and got out of there.

Farm life went on as usual, with the corn laid by and the haying started and out in the garden the strange plant kept on growing and now was taking shape. Old Mose couldn’t believe his eyes when he saw the sort of shape it took and he spent long evening hours just standing in the garden, watching it and wondering if his loneliness were playing tricks on him.

The morning came when he found the plant standing at the door and waiting for him. He should have been surprised, of course, but he really wasn’t, for he had lived with it, watching it of eventide, and although he had not dared admit it even to himself, he had known

what it was.

For here was the creature he'd found in the woods, no longer sick and keening, no longer close to death, but full of life and youth.

It was not the same entirely, though. He stood and looked at it and could see the differences—the little differences that might have been those between youth and age, or between a father and a son, or again the differences expressed in an evolutionary pattern.

"Good morning," said Mose, not feeling strange at all to be talking to the thing. "It's good to have you back."

The thing standing in the yard did not answer him. But that was not important; he had not expected that it would. The one important point was that he had something he could talk to.

"I'm going out to do the chores," said Mose. "You want to tag along?"

It tagged along with him and it watched him as he did the chores and he talked to it, which was a vast improvement over talking to himself.

At breakfast, he laid an extra plate for it and pulled up an extra chair, but it turned out the critter was not equipped to use a chair, for it wasn't hinged to sit.

Nor did it eat. That bothered Mose at first, for he was hospitable, but he told himself that a big, strong, strapping youngster like this one knew enough to take care of itself, and he probably didn't need to worry too much about how it got along.

After breakfast, he went out to the garden, with the critter accompanying him, and sure enough, the plant was gone. There was a collapsed husk lying on the ground, the outer covering that had been the cradle of the creature at his side.

Then he went to the machine shed and the creature saw the birdcage and rushed over to it and looked it over minutely. Then it turned around to Mose and made a sort of pleading gesture.

Mose went over to it and laid his hands on one of the twisted bars and the critter stood beside him and laid its hands on, too, and they pulled together. It was no use. They could move the metal some, but not enough to pull it back in shape again.

They stood and looked at one another, although looking may not be the word, for the critter had no eyes to look with. It made some funny motions with its hands, but Mose couldn't understand. Then it lay down on the floor and showed him how the birdcage ribs were fastened to the base.

It took a while for Mose to understand how the fastening worked and he never did know exactly why it did. There wasn't, actually, any reason that it should work that way.

First you applied some pressure, just the right amount at the exact

and correct angle, and the bar would move a little. Then you applied some more pressure, again the exact amount and at the proper angle, and the bar would move some more. You did this three times and the bar came loose, although there was, God knows, no reason why it should.

Mose started a fire in the forge and shoveled in some coal and worked the bellows while the critter watched. But when he picked up the bar to put it in the fire, the critter got between him and the forge, and wouldn't let him near. Mose realized then he couldn't—or wasn't supposed to—heat the bar to straighten it and he never questioned the entire rightness of it. For, he told himself, this thing must surely know the proper way to do it.

So he took the bar over to the anvil and started hammering it back into shape again, cold, without the use of fire, while the critter tried to show him the shape that it should be. It took quite a while, but finally it was straightened out to the critter's satisfaction.

Mose figured they'd have themselves a time getting the bar back in place again, but it slipped on as slick as could be.

Then they took off another bar and this one went faster, now that Mose had the hang of it.

But it was hard and grueling labor. They worked all day and only straightened out five bars.

It took four solid days to get the bars on the birdcage hammered into shape and all the time the hay was waiting to be cut.

But it was all right with Mose. He had someone to talk to and the house had lost its loneliness.

When they got the bars back in place, the critter slipped into the cage and starting fooling with a dingus on the roof of it that looked like a complicated basket. Mose, watching, figured that the basket was some sort of control.

The critter was discouraged. It walked around the shed looking for something and seemed unable to find it. It came back to Mose and made its despairing, pleading gesture. Mose showed it iron and steel; he dug into a carton where he kept bolts and clamps and bushings and scraps of metal and other odds and ends, finding brass and copper and even some aluminum, but it wasn't any of these.

And Mose was glad—a bit ashamed for feeling glad, but glad all the same.

For it had been clear to him that when the birdcage was all ready, the critter would be leaving him. It had been impossible for Mose to stand in the way of the repair of the cage, or to refuse to help. But now that it apparently couldn't be, he found himself well pleased.

Now the critter would have to stay with him and he'd have someone to talk to and the house would not be lonely. It would be

welcome, he told himself, to have folks again. The critter was almost as good a companion as Towser.

Next morning, while Mose was fixing breakfast, he reached up in the cupboard to get the box of oatmeal and his hand struck the cigar box and it came crashing to the floor. It fell over on its side and the lid came open and the dollars went free-wheeling all around the kitchen.

Out of the corner of his eye, Mose saw the critter leaping quickly in pursuit of one of them. It snatched it up and turned to Mose, with the coin held between its fingers, and a sort of thrumming noise was coming out of the nest of worms on top of it.

It bent and scooped up more of them and cuddled them and danced a sort of jig, and Mose knew, with a sinking heart, that it had been silver the critter had been hunting.

So Mose got down on his hands and knees and helped the critter gather up all the dollars. They put them back into the cigar box and Mose picked up the box and gave it to the critter.

The critter took it and hefted it and had a disappointed look. Taking the box over to the table, it took the dollars out and stacked them in neat piles and Mose could see it was very disappointed.

Perhaps, after all, Mose thought, it had not been silver the thing had been hunting for. Maybe it had made a mistake in thinking that the silver was some other kind of metal.

Mose got down the oatmeal and poured it into some water and put it on the stove. When it was cooked and the coffee was ready, he carried his breakfast to the table and sat down to eat.

The critter still was standing across the table from him, stacking and restacking the piles of silver dollars. And now it showed him with a hand held above the stacks, that it needed more of them. This many stacks, it showed him, and each stack so high.

Mose sat stricken, with a spoon full of oatmeal halfway to his mouth. He thought of all those other dollars, the iron kettle packed with them, underneath the floor boards in the living room. And he couldn't do it; they were the only thing he had—except the critter now. And he could not give them up so the critter could go and leave him too.

He ate his bowl of oatmeal without tasting it and drank two cups of coffee. And all the time the critter stood there and showed him how much more it needed.

"I can't do it for you," Old Mose said. "I've done all you can expect of any living being. I found you in the woods and I gave you warmth and shelter. I tried to help you, and when I couldn't, at least I gave you a place to die in. I buried you and protected you from all those other people and I did not pull you up when you started growing once again. Surely you can't expect me to keep on giving

endlessly."

But it was no good. The critter could not hear him and he did not convince himself.

He got up from the table and walked into the living room with the critter trailing him. He loosened the floor boards and took out the kettle, and the critter, when it saw what was in the kettle, put its arms around itself and hugged in happiness.

They lugged the money out to the machine shed and Mose built a fire in the forge and put the kettle in the fire and started melting down that hard-saved money.

There were times he thought he couldn't finish the job, but he did.

The critter got the basket out of the birdcage and put it down beside the forge and dipped out the molten silver with an iron ladle and poured it here and there into the basket, shaping it in place with careful hammer taps.

It took a long time, for it was exacting work, but finally it was done and the silver almost gone. The critter lugged the basket back into the birdcage and fastened it in place.

It was almost evening now and Mose had to go and do the chores. He half expected the thing might haul out the birdcage and be gone when he came back to the house. And he tried to be sore at it for its selfishness—it had taken from him and had not tried to pay him back—it had not, so far as he could tell, even tried to thank him. But he made a poor job of being sore at it.

It was waiting for him when he came from the barn carrying two pails full of milk. It followed him inside the house and stood around and he tried to talk to it. But he didn't have the heart to do much talking. He could not forget that it would be leaving, and the pleasure of its present company was lost in his terror of the loneliness to come.

For now he didn't even have his money to help ward off the loneliness.

As he lay in bed that night, strange thoughts came creeping in upon him—the thought of an even greater loneliness than he had ever known upon this runty farm, the terrible, devastating loneliness of the empty wastes that lay between the stars, a driven loneliness while one hunted for a place or person that remained a misty thought one could not define, but which it was most important one should find.

It was a strange thing for him to be thinking, and quite suddenly he knew it was no thought of his, but of this other that was in the room with him.

He tried to raise himself, he fought to raise himself, but he couldn't do it. He held his head up a moment, then fell back upon the pillow and went sound asleep.

Next morning, after Mose had eaten breakfast, the two of them went to the machine shed and dragged the birdcage out. It stood there, a weird alien thing, in the chill brightness of the dawn.

The critter walked up to it and started to slide between two of the bars, but when it was halfway through, it stepped out again and moved over to confront Old Mose.

"Good-by, friend," said Mose. "I'll miss you."

There was a strange stinging in his eyes.

The other held out its hand in farewell, and Mose took it and there was something in the hand he grasped, something round and smooth that was transferred from its hand to his.

The thing took its hand away and stepped quickly to the birdcage and slid between the bars. The hands reached for the basket and there was a sudden flicker and the birdcage was no longer there.

Mose stood lonely in the barnyard, looking at the place where there was no birdcage and remembering what he had felt or thought—or been told?—the night before as he lay in bed.

Already the critter would be there, out between the stars, in that black and utter loneliness, hunting for a place or thing or person that no human mind could grasp.

Slowly Mose turned around to go back to the house, to get the pails and go down to the barn to get the milking done.

He remembered the object in his hand and lifted his still-clenched fist in front of him. He opened his fingers and the little crystal ball lay there in his palm—and it was exactly like the one he'd found in the slitted flap in the body he had buried in the garden. Except that one had been dead and cloudy and this one had the living glow of a distant-burning fire.

Looking at it, he had the strange feeling of a happiness and comfort such as he had seldom known before, as if there were many people with him and all of them were friends.

He closed his hand upon it and the happiness stayed on—and it was all wrong, for there was not a single reason that he should be happy. The critter finally had left him and his money was all gone and he had no friends, but still he kept on feeling good.

He put the ball into his pocket and stepped spryly for the house to get the milking pails. He pursed up his whiskered lips and began to whistle and it had been a long, long time since he had even thought to whistle.

Maybe he was happy, he told himself, because the critter had not left without stopping to take his hand and try to say good-by.

And a gift, no matter how worthless it might be, how cheap a trinket, still had a basic value in simple sentiment. It had been many years since anyone had bothered to give him a gift.

It was dark and lonely and unending in the depths of space with no Companion. It might be long before another was obtainable.

It perhaps was a foolish thing to do, but the old creature had been such a kind savage, so fumbling and so pitiful and eager to help. And one who travels far and fast must likewise travel light. There had been nothing else to give.

The Birch Clump Cylinder

Written at the request of Judy-Lynn del Rey especially for Stellar 1*, the first issue of her original anthology series from Ballantine Books, "The Birch Clump Cylinder" (1974) is a truly professional effort. Every word, every sentence, moves the story forward; there is nothing here that is dross or surplusage. And the new and intriguing ideas are presented in a story in which the characters, so sharply delineated, seem to be the main thing. The only thing missing is, well, more.*

Even when his story needed a place of advanced learning, Cliff managed to place it in Simak country.…

—dww

1

As Bronson drove the car up the curving road that led to the front of Cramden Hall, I became aware that there had been some change, although it took a moment to figure what it was.

"The pagoda's gone," I said.

"Blew down one night several years ago," said Bronson. "High wind came up. Flimsy thing, it was."

Nothing else had changed, it seemed. Coon Creek didn't change. It stayed stodgy and a bit ramshackle and tried its humble best to seem of no account.

"Just as well it's gone," said Bronson. "It never seemed to fit. Just a little flighty for my taste."

The car wheeled up and stopped in front of the pillared portico.

"You go on in," said Bronson. "Old Prather's waiting for you. I'll put away the car and bring in your bags."

"Thanks for meeting me," I said. "It's been a long time, Bronson."

"Fifteen years," said Bronson. "Maybe nearer twenty. None of us gets any younger. You never have been back."

"No," I said, "I haven't."

The car pulled away, and as it moved out of my line of vision I saw I had been wrong. For the pagoda wasn't gone; the pagoda was still there. It squatted in the evening light exactly as I remembered it, standing in the park-like area inside the driveway curve, with a pine at one corner of it and a sprawling yew along the side.

"Charles," a voice said behind me. "Charles, it's good to see you."

I turned and saw it was Old Prather, fumbling down the steps

towards me.

I went rapidly up to meet him, and we stood there for a moment, looking at one another in the fading light. He hadn't changed too much—a little older, perhaps, a bit more frazzled at the edges, but the same erect, stiff posture that barely escaped being military. The imagined scent of chalk dust still clung to him; he was as imperious as ever, but, I thought, looking at him, perhaps a shade more kindly, mellowed with the years.

"The place looks the same as ever," I said. "Too bad the pagoda __"

"The pesky thing blew down," he said. "Gave us no end of trouble cleaning up the mess."

We went trudging up the steps together. "It was kind of you to come," he said. "As you may have gathered, we have a spot of trouble. On the phone, you understand, I couldn't be specific."

"I jumped at the chance to come," I said. "Not doing anything, of course. Not since I was booted out of Time Research."

"But that was two years ago. And you weren't booted."

"It is three years," I said, "and I most emphatically was booted."

"Dinner, I think, is ready," he said, "and we had best get to it. Old Emil—"

"Emil is still here?" I asked.

Old Prather chuckled thinly. "We carry on," he said. "Bronson and myself and Emil. Young men coming up, but they are not quite ready. We all get crotchety and at times a little prickly. Emil, especially. He is crustier than ever and is apt to scold you if you're late for meals or don't eat quite enough. He takes it as a slur on his cooking."

We reached the door and went into the foyer.

"And now," I said, "suppose you spell out this pagoda mummery."

"You saw it, then?" he said.

"Of course I saw it. After Bronson had told me it had blown down. And it was still there when you said it had blown down. If this is some elaborate gag, just because I worked on Time Research—"

"It is no trick," he said. "It's part of the reason you are here. We'll talk about it later, but now we must go in to dinner or Emil will be outraged. Did I mention, by the way, that a couple of your classmates will be dining with us? Leonard Asbury. You remember him, of course."

"Dr. Prather," I said, "I have spent all these years trying not to remember him. He was a little twerp. And what other assorted alumni have you hauled in on this pagoda business?"

He said, without any shame at all, "Only one other. Mary Holland."

"She was the one who broke your heart. She went into music."

"Charles," he said, "you mistake my function and the purpose of this institute if you think she broke my heart. The world could ill have afforded to lose the kind of music she has written."

"So," I said, "a famous mathematician, a talented composer, a down-at-the-heels time researcher. When it comes to picking a team, you really go all out."

His eyes took on a merry twinkle. "Come on in to dinner," he said, "or Emil will wear out his tongue on us."

2

The dinner had been a good one, simple and hearty—vichyssoise, a salad, prime ribs and a baked potato, with wine that was not bad at all.

Old Prather had done a lot of inconsequential and rather pompous talking. The man was a good host; you have to give him that. The rest of us said little—the kind of tentative, exploratory talk that old acquaintances, too long separated, are likely to engage in.

I studied the two of them, and I knew that they were studying me as well. I could imagine both were wondering why Old Prather had invited me, for which I could not blame them.

Leonard Asbury, I decided, was still a little twerp. His thin black hair was slicked down against his skull. His face had a hard and foxy look. When he spoke, his thin lips scarcely moved. I didn't like the bastard a bit more than I ever did.

Mary was something else again. She had been a pretty girl, and we had had some dates—nothing serious, just dates. But now her beauty had settled into a sort of matronly composure, and I had the feeling there was a lot of emptiness behind that contented face.

It was damned unsettling—the two of them. I was uneasy and wished I had not come.

"And now," said Old Prather, "let us get down to business. For I suppose you must guess that there is some business. A rather urgent matter."

He wiped his lips with his napkin, then bunched it on the table.

"I think," he said, "that Charles may have some inkling of it. He saw something when he came in that you others missed."

Both Leonard and Mary looked at me. I didn't say a word. This was Old Prather's show; let him carry on.

"It seems quite likely," he said, "that we have a time machine."

For a moment not one of us said anything, then Leonard leaned forward and said, "You mean someone here has invented—"

“I am sorry,” said Old Prather. “I do not mean that at all. A time machine has fallen into a clump of birch just above the little pond back of the machine shops.”

“Fallen?”

“Well, maybe not fallen. Appeared, perhaps, is a better word. Limpy, the gardener, found it. He is a simple lad. I guess none of you remember him. He came to us just a few years ago.”

“You mean to say it just showed up?” asked Mary.

“Yes, it just showed up. You can see it lying there, although not too clearly, for often it seems a little hazy. Objects at times appear around it, then disappear again—shunted in and out of time, we think. There have been some rather strange mirages around campus. The pagoda, for example.”

He said to me, “The contraption seems to have a penchant for the pagoda.”

Leonard said, with barely concealed nastiness, “Charles is our expert here. He is the time researcher.”

I didn’t answer him, and for a long time nothing was said at all. The silence became a little awkward. Old Prather tried to cover up the awkwardness. “You must know, of course,” he said, “that each of you is here tonight for a special reason. Here is a situation that we must come to grips with and each of you, I’m sure, will make a contribution.”

“But Dr. Prather,” Mary said, “I know less than nothing about the subject. I’ve never thought of time except in an abstract sense. I’m not even in the sciences. My whole life has been music. I’ve been concerned with little else.”

“That is exactly my point,” said Old Prather, “the reason that you’re here. We need an unsullied, an unprejudiced mind—a virgin mind, if you don’t resent the phrase—to look at this phenomenon. We need the kind of thinking that can be employed by someone like yourself, who has never thought of time except, as you have said, in an abstract sense. Both Leonard and Charles have certain preconceptions on the subject.”

“I am gratified, of course,” said Mary, “for the opportunity to be here, and quite naturally I am intrigued by what you call the ‘phenomenon.’ But actually, as you must realize, I have so provincial an attitude toward time that I doubt I can be any help at all.”

Sitting there and listening to her, I found myself in agreement with what she said. For once, Old Prather had managed to outsmart himself. His reason for bringing Mary in as a member of his team seemed utter nonsense to me.

“And I must tell you, as well,” said Leonard, “that I have done no real work on time. Naturally, in mathematics—that is, in some areas

of mathematics—time must be taken as a factor, and I am, of course, quite familiar with this. But I have never been primarily concerned with time, and I think you should know—"

Old Prather raised a hand to stop him. "Not so fast," he said. "It seems to me that all of you are hurrying to disqualify yourselves." He turned to me. "So you are left," he said. "You've said exactly nothing."

"Perhaps," I said, "because I have nothing to say."

"The fact remains," he insisted, "that you were with Time Research. I'm burning with curiosity about the project. At least you can tell us something of what it's all about. I'm particularly interested in how you came to disassociate yourself."

"I didn't disassociate myself. I was fired. I was booted out the door. You know the background of the project. The premise, and it is a solid premise, is that if we're ever to venture beyond the solar system—if we hope to reach the stars—we have to know a little more about the space-time concept than we know now."

"I heard some rumor," said Leonard, "of a terrific row. My informant said—"

"I don't know how terrific," I said, "but, as far as I was concerned, it was sort of final. You see, I thought in terms of divorcing time from space, splitting the two into separate entities. And, goddam it, when you think of it, they are two separate factors. But science has talked so long of the space-time continuum that it has become an article of faith. There seems to be a prevalent idea that if you separate the two of them you tear the universe apart—that they are somehow welded together to make up the universe. But if you're going to work with time, you have to work with time alone, not with time and something else. Either you work with time or you work with nothing."

"It all sounds highly philosophical to me," said Old Prather.

"Here at Coon Creek," I told him, "you and several others taught us the philosophical approach. I remember what you used to tell us. Think hard and straight, you said, and to hell with all the curves."

He coughed a highly artificial cough. "I rather doubt," he said, "I phrased it quite that way."

"Of course you didn't. Mine was an oversimplified translation. Your words were very much more genteel and greatly convoluted. And it's not as philosophical as it seems; it's just common sense—some of that hard, straight thinking you always urged upon us. If you are to work with anything, you must first know what you are working with, or at least have some theory as to what it is. Your theory can be wrong, of course."

"And that," said Leonard, "was the reason you were canned."

"That was the reason I was canned. An unrealistic approach, they said. No one would go along with it."

While I had been talking, Old Prather had risen from the table and walked across the room to an ancient sideboard. He took a book from one of the drawers and walked back to the table. He handed the book to Leonard, then sat down again.

Leonard opened the book and started riffling through the pages. Suddenly he stopped riffling and stared intently at a page.

He looked up, puzzled. "Where did you get this?" he asked.

"You remember I told you certain objects were appearing around the time machine," said Old Prather. "Appearing and then disappearing—"

"'What kind of objects?" Mary asked.

"Different things. Mostly commonplace things. I recall there was a baseball bat. A battered bicycle wheel. Boxes, bottles, all kinds of junk. Close around the contraption. We let them go. We were afraid to come too close to it. One could get tangled up with the time effect. No one knows what it might do."

"But someone," said Leonard, "managed to snag this book."

"Limpy," said Old Prather. "He's a little short of sense. But, for some reason, he is intrigued by books. Not that he can do much reading in them. Especially in that one."

"I should think not," said Leonard. He saw that I was looking intently at him. "All right, Charles," he said, "I'll tell you. It is mathematics. Apparently a new kind of mathematics. I'll have to study it."

"From the future?" I asked.

"From about two centuries in the future," said Old Prather, "if you can believe the imprint date."

"There is no reason, is there, to disbelieve it?"

"Not at all," said Old Prather, happily.

"One thing," I said, "that you haven't mentioned. The dimensions of this machine of yours. What characteristics does it have?"

"If you're thinking of a container that was designed to carry a human passenger, it's not that at all. This one's not nearly big enough. It's cylindrical, three feet long or less. It's made of some sort of metal —a metal cylinder. Grillwork of some sort at each end, but no sign of any operational machinery. It doesn't look like what one would think of as a time machine, but it does seem to have the effects of one. All the objects appearing and disappearing. And the mirages. We call them mirages for lack of a better term. The pagoda, for example, the pagoda that really did blow down, flicking on and off. People walking about, strangers who appear momentarily, then are gone. Occasional structures, like the ghosts of structures, not quite in the present, but not in the future, either. And they have to be from the future, for there's never been anything like them here. A boat on the pond. So far

as I know, the pond has never had a boat. Too small for a boat. As you recall, just a little puddle."

"You've taken precautions against someone stumbling into its field?"

"We've put a fence around it. Ordinarily, someone is watching to warn off stray visitors. But, as you know, we seldom have stray visitors. We'll all go out and have a look at it tomorrow, first thing after breakfast."

"Why not now?" asked Leonard.

"No reason," said Old Prather, "but we wouldn't be able to see much. We have no lights out there. However, if you wish—"

Leonard made a gesture of agreement. "Tomorrow's soon enough," he said.

"Another thing you may have been wondering about," said Old Prather, "is how it got there. As I told you, the gardener found it. I said at first it fell, then corrected myself and said it had arrived. The correction was not quite an honest one. There is some evidence it fell —some broken branches in the birch clump that might have been broken when the thing plunged through the trees."

"You say 'fell,'" said Mary. "Fell from where?"

"We are not sure, but we do have a hypothesis. Something happened west of here a few nights ago. A plane was reported down. Out in the hills. A wild and tangled country, as you may remember. Several people saw it falling. Searchers were sent out, but now the story is that there never was a plane. The news reports indicate it might have been a meteorite, mistaken for a plane. It is fairly clear that someone stepped in and quickly hushed it up. I made a few discreet inquiries of friends in Washington, and the word seems to be that a spaceship fell. Not one of our ships. All of ours can be accounted for. The supposition is that it may have been an alien ship."

"And you think the time machine fell off the alien ship," said Leonard. "It was breaking up and—"

"But why would an alien ship carry a time machine?" asked Mary.

"Not a time machine," I said. "A time engine. A drive that uses time as a source of energy."

3

Unable to sleep, I let myself out to go for a walk. The moon had just risen above the eastern hills, shedding a sickly light that barely dispersed the dark.

I hadn't been able to sleep. I had closed my eyes and tried, but

then had been compelled to open them and stare up at the ceiling that was really not a ceiling, but just a square of darkness.

A time engine, I told myself. Time used as energy. Christ, then, I had been right! If it turned out that the thing in the clump of birch out there above the lake actually was an engine, then I had been right and all the others had been wrong. And, more than that, if time could be used as an energy, the universe lay open—not just the nearby stars, not just the galaxy, but the entire universe, everything that was. For if time could be manipulated—and to use it as a source of energy would mean that it would have to be capable of manipulation—then the distances of space would no longer count at all, would never need to be considered, and man could go anywhere he wished.

I looked up at the stars and I wanted to shout at them: Now we have you by the throat, now you are reachable, now your remoteness can no longer count with us. Your remoteness or the even more incredible remoteness of your sister stars that are so far that no matter how fiercely the fires may burn within them, we can catch no glimpse of them. Not even the dimmer stars, nor even the stars unseeable, are beyond our reach.

I wanted to yell at them, but of course I did not yell at them. You do not yell at stars. A star is too impersonal a thing to think of yelling at.

I walked down the driveway and followed a sidewalk that angled up the hill toward the observatory, and looking off to my left, I thought: Just over that little rise of ground in the clump of birch that stands above the pond. Trying to envision the cylinder that lay in the clump of birch, I wondered for the thousandth time if it might really be what I thought it was.

As I went around a curve in the winding walk, a man rose silently from a bench where he had been sitting. I stopped, somewhat startled by his sudden appearance; I had thought that at this time of night I would have been alone.

“Charley Spencer,” said the man. “Can it be Charley Spencer?”

“It could be,” I said. His face was in the shadow, and I could not make it out.

“I must apologize,” he said, “for intruding on your walk. I thought I was alone. You may not remember me. I am Kirby Winthrop.”

I went back through my memory, and a name came out of it. “But I do remember you,” I said. “You were a year or two behind me. I have often wondered what became of you.” Which was a lie, of course; I’d never thought of him.

“I stayed on,” he said. “There’s something about the place that gets into the blood. Doing some teaching. Mostly research. Old Prather pulled you in on the time machine?”

"Myself and some others," I told him. "What do you know about it?"

"Nothing, really. It's outside my field. I'm in cybernetics. That's why I'm out here. I often come out on the hill, when it's quiet, and think."

"When it comes to cybernetics," I told him, "I rank as fairly stupid."

"It's a wide field," he said. "I'm working on intelligence."

"Indeed," I said.

"Machine intelligence," he said.

"Can machines be intelligent?" I asked.

He said, "I rather think they can."

"You're making progress, then?"

"I have a theory I am working on," he said.

"Well, that is fine," I said. "I wish you all success."

I sensed in him a hunger to talk, now that he had found someone new he could tell about his work; but I was not about to stand around with him out there in the night.

"I think I'll turn back," I said. "It's getting chilly and maybe now I can get some sleep."

I turned to go, and he said to me, "I'd like to ask you something, Charley. How many people have you ever told you got your education at Coon Creek?"

The question startled me, and I turned back to face him.

"That's a funny question, Kirby."

"Maybe so," he said, "but how many have you?"

"As few as possible," I said. I hesitated for a moment, waiting for him to speak, and when he didn't, I said, "It was good to see you, Kirby," and I headed back toward the hall.

But he called after me, and I swung around again.

"There is something else," he said. "What do you know of the history of Coon Creek?"

"Not a thing," I said. "I'm not even curious."

"I was," he said, "and I did some checking. Do you know there has never been a cent of public money in this place? And in all its history, it has never had a research grant. So far as I can find, it has never applied for one."

"There is an endowment of some sort," I said. "Someone by the name of Cramden, way back in the eighties. Cramden Hall is named for him."

"That is right," said Winthrop, "but there never was a Cramden. Someone put up the money in his name, but there never was a Cramden. No one by the name of Cramden."

"Who was it, then?"

“I don’t know,” he said.

“Well,” I said, “I don’t suppose it makes a great deal of difference now. Coon Creek is here and that is all that counts.”

I started off down the walk again, and this time he let me go.

Good to see you, I had told him, but it had not been good. I scarcely remembered the man—a name out of the past, a name without a face. And I still did not have the face, for his back had been toward the moon and I had not seen his face.

And all that silly talk about did I often mention Coon Creek and who had endowed the college. What had the man been getting at and why should he be so concerned? In any case, I told myself, it did not matter to me. I wasn’t going to be here long enough for it to matter to me.

I went back to the driveway. When I got to the foot of the stairs that led to Cramden Hall, I turned around and looked back down the curving drive toward the manicured landscape that lay within the curve.

Coon Creek, I thought. God, yes, Coon Creek. It was a place you never mentioned because it had a corny sound and people always asked you where it was and what kind of school it was; and there really were no answers. “I never heard of it,” they’d say, “but it sounds so interesting.”

You couldn’t tell them they had never heard of it because they were not supposed to hear of it, that it was quietly tucked away and had its corny name so that no one in his right mind would ever want to go to it. Nor could you tell them that the school selected its students rather than the students selecting it, that it went out and recruited brains, exactly as other colleges, intent on winning football teams, recruited brawn.

“Brains” would not be the precise word, since some of us—and I was one of them—were not all that brainy. Rather it was an ability of a certain kind which had never been quite defined, an approach to problems and a philosophy that was undefined as well known, of course, to certain people, but certainly not to those chosen ones who were invited to become students at Coon Creek. How they found us no one really knew, and who was behind it all was unknown as well. The government, I had always thought, but I had been far from sure. The selection process had a sort of undercover secret sneakiness that had the feel of government. Although, if what Winthrop had told me was correct, it was not government.

Not all of us, of course, turned out as well as might have been expected. I had not for one. And Mary . . . well, maybe Mary hadn’t either. During her days at the institute, I recalled, she had exhibited an interest in economics that must have been upsetting to Old Prather

and perhaps to many others; and then she had gone off at a tangent into music, which must have been the farthest from what those who engineered the college must have had in mind. Leonard, of course, was another case—one of the more successful ones—a brilliant mathematician who was pushing science beyond logic and into an intuitional area that gave some promise of arriving at some understanding not only of the mechanism, but of the purpose of the universe.

I stood for a short time looking at the driveway and the area it enclosed—waiting, I think, for the pagoda to come back again; but it did not come back, so I turned and went up the stairs.

4

The time machine, as Old Prather had described it, was wedged between the boles of the clump of birch. It had a sort of hazy, flickering look to it, but not so much that it could not be seen with some clarity. The space around it was fairly clear of time-debris. There were a tennis ball and an old boot, but that was all. While we watched the boot went away.

"We did a little preliminary investigation," Old Prather said, "before the three of you arrived. We rigged up a camera on a boom and got it in as close as we could manage to photograph the entire surface—all, that is, except the portion of it that is resting on the ground. We lost the first camera. It was shifted into time or whatever happens when you get too close to it. We didn't lose the second camera, and we found out one thing. Close down against the ground and shielded by a tree trunk is what appears to be a control of some sort."

Old Prather opened the folder he carried underneath his arm, and we crowded around to look. A couple of photographs showed what seemed to be a control, a circular patch set into the metal of the cylinder; but that was all, a circular patch. There were no calibration marks, but there seemed to be three little projections set into the edge of the circle. The projections at one time could have been tied into a control mechanism of some sort, but there was nothing to indicate they had.

"Nothing else?" asked Leonard.

"Only a couple of rough spots on the surface," said Old Prather. He found the photographs. "One on one end, another on the opposite end."

"They could mark the positions," I said, "where the time engine was mounted on the craft. If it is a time engine and was on a craft.

The spots where the engine broke from its mountings."

"You're fairly certain of that, though," said Leonard, a little nastily.

"It's an idea," I said. "That is all it is."

"It seems to me," said Leonard, "that we need more people in on this than just the three of us. Charley here is the only one of us who knows anything about time and—"

"Whatever I know of it," I told him, "is only theoretical. I'd have no idea how a contraption like this could be put together. We can't just go wading in. If it is a time engine, I would guess it is only idling; but we still have no idea what a time-force can do. Maybe it's not too powerful, but the power is probably fluctuating. If we start messing around with it and do something that turns it on full power—"

Old Prather nodded gravely. "I can realize the danger," he said, "but if it's possible to do so, I'd prefer to see this discovery kept within the family. It would be against my grain to share it with someone else —especially with the government. And if we went to anyone it should be the government."

"Our time machine would be easier to work with," said Mary, "if we could get it out of that birch clump—out into the open where we could roll it around and get at it better."

"We had thought of that," said Old Prather, "but we were afraid to touch it. We could pry it out of there, of course, but—"

"I don't think," said Leonard, "that we should touch it yet. Even the slightest jar might affect the mechanism. Trouble is, we're working in the dark. We don't know what we have. If we could turn it off—but I haven't the faintest idea how to turn it off. That control circle, maybe, if it is a control. But how do you get to it to turn it?"

"You said Limpy got the book," Mary said to Old Prather. "How did he manage it? Did he reach in and get it?"

"He was carrying a hoe," Old Prather said. "He hooked it out with that."

"Maybe," said Leonard, "someone in the shops could rig up something we could use to manipulate the circle. Attach it to a long handle, and we might reach in. There are those three little nibs on the outside of the circle. If we had a tool of some sort that would engage them, we might be in business."

"That's fine," I said, "but would you know which way to turn the circle?"

We needn't have worried which way to turn it. The shop rigged up a tool, working from the photographs. The first time it was not quite the right size. The second time around it fit, but it didn't work. It slid past the nibs. The metal had what appeared to be an oily quality. There seemed no way to get a grip on it. The shop went on, working

into the night, trying to engineer something that might do the job. But all of us, even the shop, knew there was little chance.

That night at dinner we tried to talk it out. There was no talking it out, however. The problem had too many angles to it—not just how we'd get the engine shut down, but what we'd do with it once it was shut down. How did you go about investigating a time mechanism? If you were lucky, of course, you might take it apart, photographing and diagramming each step in taking it apart. You might even be able to take it apart and put it back together and still not be able to find what made it operate. Even when you had it all spread out, even when you had examined every component of it, understanding the relationship of each component to all the rest of it, the principle might still escape you.

Chances were, we agreed, that stripping it down would involve some danger, perhaps considerable danger. Somewhere within that metal cylinder was a factor no one understood. Checks and balances were built into the machine to control that factor. Unbalance this system and you would be face to face with time, or that factor we called "time"; and no one, absolutely no one, knew what time might be.

"What we'll need," said Leonard, "is something that will contain time, that will insulate it."

"Okay," I said. "That is exactly it. Something that damps the time factor while we work, so that we aren't blown back into the Carboniferous or forward to the point where the universe is approaching heat death."

"I don't think the time force is that strong," Old Prather objected.

"Probably not, the way it is now," said Leonard. "Charley thinks the engine is idling, maybe barely functioning. But if that thing out there is what we think it is, it has to have the requisite power to drive a spaceship over many light-years."

"The damping factor would have to be something that is immaterial," I said. "Something that is not a part of the material universe. Anything that has mass would be affected by time. What we need is something upon which time has no effect."

"Light, maybe," said Mary. "Lasers."

Leonard shook his head. "Either time affects light," he said, "or light has established its own time parameter. It travels only so fast. And while it may not seem so, it is actually material. Light can be bent by a strong magnetic field. What we need is something outside time and independent of it."

"Well, maybe the mind, then," said Mary. "Thought. Telepathic thought aimed at the engine, establishing some sort of rapport with it."

“That fits our specifications,” Old Prather agreed, “but we’re a thousand years too soon. We don’t know what thought is. We don’t know how the mind operates. We have no telepaths.”

“Well,” said Mary, “I did my best. I came up with two bad ideas. How about the rest of you?”

“Witchery,” I said. “Let us go to Africa or the Caribbean and get us a good witch doctor.”

I had meant to be facetious, but it didn’t seem to strike them that way. They sat there looking at me like three solemn owls.

“A resonance of some sort,” said Leonard.

“I know about that,” said Mary, “and it wouldn’t work. You’re talking about a kind of music, and I know music. Time is a part of music. Music is based on time.”

Leonard frowned. “I said it wrong,” he told us, “and without too much thought. What I was thinking about were atoms. Perhaps there is no such thing as time in atomic structure. Some investigators have advanced the theory. If we could line up atoms, get them into some sort of random step—” He shook his head. “No, it wouldn’t work. There’s no way in God’s world that it could be done, and even if it could, I guess it wouldn’t work.”

“A strong magnetic field,” said Old Prather. “Wrap the engine in a magnetic field.”

“Fine,” I said. “That might do the trick. The field might bend and contain time. But, aside from the fact that we can’t build such a field…”

“If we could,” said Mary, “we couldn’t work inside the field. What we’re talking about is how to control time so we can investigate the engine.”

“The only thing left is death,” I said. “Death is a timeless thing.”

“Can you tell me what death is?” snapped Leonard.

“No, I can’t,” I said, grinning at him.

“You’re a smart aleck,” he said viciously. “You always were.”

“Now, now,” said Old Prather, completely horrified. “Let us have more wine. There’s still some left in the bottle.”

“We aren’t getting anywhere,” said Mary, “so what difference does it make? Death sounds as good to me as any of the others.”

I bowed to her with mock gravity, and she made a face at me. Old Prather went skipping around the table like a concerned cricket, pouring the wine.

“I hope,” he said, “the boys in the shop can come up with something that will turn the control dial.”

“If they don’t,” said Mary, “we’ll do it by hand. Have you ever thought how the human hand is often more versatile than the finest tool?”

“Trouble is,” said Leonard, “that however ingenious the tool may be, it is going to be awkward. You have to stand so far away, and you’re working at a dirty angle.”

“But we can’t do it by hand,” Old Prather protested. “There is the time effect.”

“On little things,” said Mary. “On books and tennis balls and boots. Never on a living thing. Never on anything with the mass of a human body.”

“I still wouldn’t want to try it,” said Leonard.

5

We tried it. We had to try it.

The tools the shop dreamed up wouldn’t work, and we simply couldn’t leave the time machine there in the clump of birch. It was still operating. While we watched, a battered wrist watch, a tattered notebook, an old felt hat appeared and disappeared. And momentarily the boat was upon the pond that had never known a boat.

“I spent last night with the mathematics text,” said Leonard, “hoping I might find something that might help us, but I didn’t find a thing. Some new and intriguing concepts, of course, but nothing that could be applied to time.”

“We could construct a good strong fence around it,” said Old Prather, “and leave it there until we know what to do with it.”

“Nonsense,” said Mary. “Why, for heaven’s sake, a fence? All we need to do is step in there—”

“No,” said Leonard. “No, I don’t think we should. We don’t know —”

“We know,” said Mary, “that it can move small objects. Nothing of any mass at all. And all of them are inanimate. Not a single living thing. Not a rabbit, not a squirrel. Not even a mouse.”

“Maybe there aren’t any mice,” said Old Prather.

“Fiddlesticks,” said Mary. “There are always mice.”

“The pagoda,” said Leonard. “Quite some distance from this place and a rather massive structure.”

“But inanimate,” said Mary.

“You mentioned mirages, I believe,” I said to Old Prather. “Buildings and people.”

“Yes,” he said, “but merely shadows. Very shadowy.”

“God. I don’t know,” I said. “Maybe Mary’s right. Maybe it has no real effect on anything that’s living.”

“We’d be gambling, you know,” said Leonard.

“Leonard, that is what is wrong with you,” said Mary. “I’ve been

wondering all this time what was wrong with you. And now it seems I know. You never gamble, do you?"

"Never," said Leonard. "There is no sense in gambling. It's a sucker's game."

"Of course not," said Mary. "A computer for a brain. A lot of little mathematical equations to spell out life for you. You're different from the rest of us. I gamble; Charley, here, would gamble—"

"All right," I said, "cut out the arguing. I'll do the job. You say fingers are better than tools, so let us find out. All you have to tell me is which way I should turn it."

Mary grabbed my arm. "No, you don't," she said. "I was the one who started this. I'm the one to do it."

"Why don't the two of you," Leonard said in his nasty, twerpy way, "draw straws to determine which one of you it'll be?"

"Now that is a good idea," Mary said. "But not the two of us. It'll be the three of us."

Old Prather had been doing some twittering around, and now he blurted out, "I think this is the height of foolishness. Drawing straws, indeed! I do not approve of it. I approve it not at all. But if straws are being drawn, there must be four of them."

"Not on your life," I said. "If it should happen that the three of us are caught up in time and whisked very swiftly hence, someone must be left to explain it all. And you are the man to do that. You explain everything so well. You've been doing it for years."

It was insane, of course. If we had taken all of thirty seconds to really talk it over, we would not have done it. But each of us had got caught up in the excitement and each of us had invested some ego in the project, and we couldn't back away. Leonard could have, probably, but he'd got caught up in a sort of stubborn pride. If he had said, "No, I won't go along with it," that might have ended it. But if he'd done that he'd have confessed to cowardliness, and he couldn't quite do that.

We didn't draw straws. We put three pieces of paper in Old Prather's hat, the pieces of paper marked, 1, 2, and 3.

Mary got the 1, Leonard the 2, and I came up with 3.

"Well, that settles it," said Mary. "I'm the first to try it. Which is only right, since I suggested it."

"The hell with that," I said. "Just tell me which way it should be turned—if it can be turned, that is."

"Charles," said Mary, primly, "after all these years you are being chauvinistic, and you know very well I'll insist upon my right."

"Oh, for Christ sake," said Leonard, "let her go ahead! She's the one who's sure."

"I still do not approve," said Old Prather, rather fussily, "but you

did draw numbers. I wash my hands of the matter. I disassociate myself from it."

"Bully for you," I said.

"I shall turn it clockwise," said Mary. "After all, that is the way __"

"You can't be sure," said Leonard. "Just because that is a human convention."

Before I could reach out to stop her, she darted into the clump of birch and was bending over to reach the control circle. Fascinated, I watched in that split second when her fingers gripped and turned. I distinctly saw the control circle move. So she had been right, after all, I thought: fingers were better than a tool.

But even as I thought it, Mary disappeared, and around the cylinder there was a sudden flurry of many different articles dredged out of time and moved into the present from the past and future and—once arrived—shunted to the past or future, continuing the direction of their flow. There was a pocket radio, a brightly colored shirt, a knapsack, a couple of children's blocks, a pair of spectacles, a woman's purse and, so help me God, a rabbit.

"She turned it the wrong way!" I shouted. "It's no longer idling."

Leonard took a quick step forward, then paused, took another slow step. For an instant more I waited, and when he didn't move, I reached out an arm and swept him to one side. Then I was in the clump of birch and reaching down. I felt my fingers on the circle, felt the flesh sink into the little nibs, and my brain roared at me: counterclockwise, counterclockwise, counterclockwise…

I don't really remember turning the control circle, but suddenly the time debris that had been washing over and around my feet was no longer there, and neither was the cylinder.

Slowly I straightened up and backed out of the clump of birch. "What the hell happened to the engine?" I asked. And as I said it, I turned around to catch the response of the others, but there were no others.

I stood alone and shivered. Everything was the way it had been before. The day was still a sunny day, the birch clump looked the same as ever, and the pond was the same as well, although not quite the same, for now a small rowboat was pulled up on the shore.

I shivered at the sight of it, then held myself stiff and straight to forestall further shivering. My mind clicked over reluctantly and told me what I fought against believing.

Had I done the job? I wondered. Had I turned the engine off, or had Leonard had to go in and complete the job? Then I knew I must have done it, for neither Leonard nor Old Prather would have followed up.

The cylinder was gone and gone how long ago? I wondered. And where was Mary? And what about the boat?

I headed across the slope toward Cramden Hall, and as I went along I kept a sharp outlook for changes. But if there were changes, they were not pronounced enough for me to notice them. I remembered that through the years Coon Creek did not change. It stayed stodgy and a bit ramshackle and tried its humble best to seem of no account. It wore an ancient coat of protective coloration.

There were a few students about. As I came down to the sidewalk that led to the curving driveway, I met one face to face; but he paid no attention to me. He was carrying a clutch of books underneath his arm and seemed in something of a hurry.

I climbed the stairs in front of the hall and let myself into the hushed twilight of the foyer. There was no one around, although I heard the sound of footsteps going down a hall that was out of sight.

Standing there, I felt unaccountably an outsider, as if I had no right to be there. Just down the hall was Old Prather's office. He would have the answer, and whether I belonged or not, I told myself, I was entitled to the answer.

But there was a chilliness in the place that I didn't like, a chilliness and, now that the sound of distant footsteps had ceased, a silence that went with the chilliness.

I half turned to leave, then turned back, and as I turned, a man came out of the door of Old Prather's office. He headed down the hall toward me, and I stayed standing there, not knowing what to do, not wanting to turn about and leave, wishing in a frantic moment that the man coming down the hall should fail to see me there, although I knew that undoubtedly he had seen me.

It was time displacement, I knew, a sense of time displacement. It was something we had often talked about in idle moments back at Time Research. If a man were moved in time, would he feel out of place? Would he sense a different time frame? Was man aware of time? Was a specific temporal bracket an unseen factor of personal environment?

The light in the hall was dim, and the face of the man who was approaching me was a very ordinary face—a stereotype, one of those faces that one sees on thousands of different people, with so little remarkable about them that there is nothing to remember, with the end result that all of these faces come to look alike.

The man slowed his pace as he came nearer to me. Then he said, "Is there any way I can help you? Are you looking for someone?"

"Prather," I said.

A change came over his face, a sudden change that was at once fear and wonderment. He stopped and stared at me.

"Charley?" he asked, questioningly. "You are Charley Spencer?"

"That is who I am," I said. "And now about Old Prather."

"Old Prather's dead," he said.

"And you?"

"'You should remember me. I am Kirby Winthrop. I took over Prather's place."

"Fast work," I said. "I saw you just the other night."

"Fifteen years ago," said Kirby. "Our meeting on Observatory Hill was fifteen years ago."

It staggered me a little, but I guess I was prepared for it. I hadn't really thought about it; I had not allowed myself to think about it. If I had any real reaction, it would have been relief that it was not a hundred years.

"What about Mary?" I asked. "Has she shown up yet?"

"I think perhaps you could stand a drink," said Kirby. "I know damn well I could. Let's go and have a drink."

He came up to me and linked his arm in mine, and we went marching down the hall to the room he'd left.

He said to the girl in the outer office, "Hold all calls. I'm in to no one."

Then he hustled me into the inner office.

He almost pushed me into a deep, upholstered chair in one corner of the office and went to a small bar under the windows.

"Have you a preference, Charley?"

"If you have some scotch," I said.

He came back with the glasses, handed one to me and sat down in an opposite chair.

"Now we can talk," he said. "But get down a slug of liquor first. You know, all these years I've been sort of expecting you. Not wondering when you would show up, of course, but if you would."

"Afraid I would," I said.

"Well, maybe something of that, too. But not very much. Slightly embarrassing, of course, but—"

Kirby left the sentence hanging in the air. I took a snort of scotch. "I asked you about Mary."

He shook his head. "She won't be coming. She went the other way."

"You mean into the past."

"That's right. We'll talk about it later."

"I see the time contraption's gone. Did I shut it off?"

"You shut it off."

"I wondered if maybe Leonard or Old Prather—"

He shrugged. "Not Leonard. He was a basket case. And Old Prather—well, you see, Old Prather never was a part of it. He never

really was a part of anything at all. He stood outside of everything. Only an observer. That was his way of life, his function. He had people doing things for him—"

"I see," I said. "So you got it out of there. Where is it now?"

"It? You mean the engine?"

"That's right."

"Right at the moment it's up in the Astrophysics Building."

"I don't remember—"

"It's new," he said. "The first new building on the campus for more than fifty years. It and the spaceport."

I came half out of my chair, then settled back again. "A spaceport —"

"Charley," said Kirby, "we've been out to the Centauri system and 61 Cygni."

"We?"

"Us. Right here. Coon Creek Institute."

"Then it worked!"

"You're damned right it worked."

"The stars," I said. "My God, we're going to the stars! You know, that night when we met out on the hill… that night I wanted to shout to the stars, to tell them we were coming. What have you found out there?"

"Centauri, nothing. Just the three stars. Interesting, of course, but no planets. Not even space-debris. A planetary system never formed, never got started. Cygni has planets, twelve of them, but nothing one could land on. Methane giants, others that are in the process of forming crusts, one burned-out cinder close up to the sun."

"Then there are planets."

'Yes, millions, billions of solar systems. Or at least that's what we think."

"You say us. How about the others? How about the government?"

"Charley," he said, "you don't understand. We are the only ones who have it. No one else."

"But—"

"I know. They've tried. We've said no. Remember, we are a private institution. Not a dime of federal or state or any other kind of money—"

"Coon Creek," I said, half choking at the ridiculous thought of it. "Good old Coon Creek, come into its own."

"We've had to set up a security system," Kirby said primly. "We have all sort of sensors and detectors and guards three deep around the place. It plays hell with the budget."

"You say you have the engine here. That means you were able to build others."

"No problem. We took the engine apart. We charted it, we measured its components, we photographed it. We have it down on tape to the last millimeter of it. We can build hundreds of them, but there is one thing—"

"Yes?"

"We don't know what makes it work. We missed the principle."

"Leonard?"

"Leonard's dead. Has been for years. Committed suicide. I don't think even if he'd lived—"

"There's something else," I said. "You wouldn't have dared to tinker with the engine if you hadn't had a way to damp the time effect. Old Prather and the three of us kicked that one around—"

"Intelligence," said Kirby.

"What do you mean—intelligence?"

"You remember that night we talked. I told you I was building—"

"An intelligent machine!" I shouted. "You mean to tell me?"

"Yes, I mean to tell you. An intelligent machine. I almost had it that night I talked with you."

"Mary was on the right track, then," I said. "That night at dinner she said 'thought.' Telepathic thought aimed at the engine. You see, it had to be some immaterial thing. We beat our brains out and could come up with nothing. But we knew we had to have a damper."

I sat silently, trying to get it all straight in my mind.

"The government suspects," I said, "where you got the engine. There was that crashed spaceship."

"There was a spaceship," said Kirby. "They finally got enough of it to guess how it was built. Picked up some organic matter, too, but not enough to get a good idea of its passengers. They suspect, of course, that we got the engine, although they aren't even sure there was an engine. We've never admitted we found anything at all. Our story is we invented it."

"They must have known, even from the first, something funny was going on," I pointed out. "Mary and I disappeared. That would have taken some explanation. Not myself, of course, but Mary was something of a celebrity."

"I'm a bit ashamed to tell you this," said Kirby, and he did look a bit ashamed. "We didn't actually say so, but we made it seem that the two of you had run off together."

"Mary wouldn't have thanked you for that," I told him.

"After all," he said, defensively, "the two of you had some dates while you were students."

"There's one thing you've not been telling me," I said. "You said Mary went into the past. How do you know that?"

He didn't answer for a while, and then he finally asked a

question. “You remember that night we talked out on the hill?”

I nodded. “We talked about your intelligent machine.”

“More than that. I told you there never was a man named Cramden, that the endowment money came from someone else but was credited to a non-existent Cramden.”

“So what does that have to do with it?”

“It was something that Old Prather remembered. He told me about the argument you had about the drawing of the straws or paper slips out of a hat or something of the sort. Leonard wanted none of it. Shutting off the engine the way you did it, he said, was a gamble. And Mary said sure it was a gamble and that she was willing to gamble.”

He stopped and looked at me. I shook my head. “I don’t get it,” I said. “Is all this supposed to have some meaning?”

“Well, it turned out later that she was a gambler—a most accomplished gambler. She’d racked up half a fortune in the stock market. No one knew too much about it until later. She did it rather quietly.”

“Wait a second, there,” I said. “She was interested in economics. She took some courses and did a lot of reading. Economics and music. I’ve always wondered why she was ever chosen for the institute—”

“Precisely,” he said. “Many times, in the dead of night, I’ve wondered that myself, and each time I have been somewhat frightened at how it all turned out. Can you imagine the sort of killing that someone like Mary, with her kind of background, could make if they were thrown a hundred years into the past? They’d know the pattern. They’d know what to buy, when to get in, when to get out. Not specifically, of course, but from their knowledge of history.”

“Are you just guessing or do you have some facts?”

“Some facts,” he said. “Not too many. A few. Enough for an educated guess.”

“So little Mary Holland is thrown into the past, makes herself a bundle, endows Coon Creek Institute—”

“More than that,” he said. “There was the initial endowment, of course, the one that got us started. And then, about fifteen years ago, about the time the time-engine business started, there was a supplementary endowment that had been in escrow in a New York bank for years, pegged to be paid off at a given time. A rather handsome sum. This time there was a name—a certain Genevieve Lansing. From the little I could find she had been an eccentric old character who was an accomplished pianist, although she never played in public. And the thing that made her so eccentric was that at a time when no one else ever even thought about it, she was utterly convinced that some day man would go out to the stars.”

I said nothing for a long time and neither did he. He got up and

brought a bottle from the bar and splashed some more liquor in our glasses.

Finally I stirred in my chair. “She knew,” I said. “She knew you’d need that supplementary endowment to develop a spaceship and spaceport facilities.”

“That’s what we used it for,” he said. “We named the ship the *Genevieve Lansing*. I ached to call it the *Mary Holland*, but I didn’t dare.”

I finished off my liquor and put the glass down on a table. “I wonder, Kirby,” I said, “if you’d put me up for a day or two. Until I can get my feet under me. I don’t quite feel up to walking out immediately.”

“We couldn’t let you go in any case,” said Kirby. “We can’t have you turning up. Remember, you and Mary Holland ran off together fifteen years ago.”

“But I can’t just stay here. I’ll take a different name if you think I should. At this late date, no one would recognize me.”

“Charley,” he said, “you wouldn’t just be staying here. There’s work for you to do. You may be the one man alive who can do the job that’s waiting.”

“I can’t imagine…”

“I told you we can build time engines. We can use them to go out to the stars. But we don’t know why they work. We don’t know the principle. That’s an intolerable situation. The job’s less than half done, there’s still a lot to do.”

I got out of the chair slowly. “Coon Creek,” I said. “Tied forever to Coon Creek.”

He held out his hand to me. “Charley,” he said, “we’re glad to have you home.”

And standing there, shaking hands with him, I reminded myself it need not be Coon Creek forever. One of these days I might be going to the stars.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

During his fifty-five-year career, CLIFFORD D. SIMAK produced some of the most iconic science fiction stories ever written. Born in 1904 on a farm in southwestern Wisconsin, Simak got a job at a small-town newspaper in 1929 and eventually became news editor of the *Minneapolis Star-Tribune*, writing fiction in his spare time.

Simak was best known for the book *City*, a reaction to the horrors of World War II, and for his novel *Way Station*. In 1953 *City* was awarded the International Fantasy Award, and in following years, Simak won three Hugo Awards and a Nebula Award. In 1977 he became the third Grand Master of the Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America, and before his death in 1988, he was named one of three inaugural winners of the Horror Writers Association's Bram Stoker Award for Lifetime Achievement.

ABOUT THE EDITOR

DAVID W. WIXON was a close friend of Clifford D. Simak's. As Simak's health declined, Wixon, already familiar with science fiction publishing, began more and more to handle such things as his friend's business correspondence and contract matters. Named literary executor of the estate after Simak's death, Wixon began a long-term project to secure the rights to all of Simak's stories and find a way to make them available to readers who, given the fifty-five-year span of Simak's writing career, might never have gotten the chance to enjoy all of his short fiction. Along the way, Wixon also read the author's surviving journals and rejected manuscripts, which made him uniquely able to provide Simak's readers with interesting and thought-provoking commentary that sheds new light on the work and thought of a great writer.

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Cover design by Jason Gabbert

978-1-5040-3734-1

Published in 2016 by Open Road Integrated Media, Inc.

180 Maiden Lane

New York, NY 10038

www.openroadmedia.com

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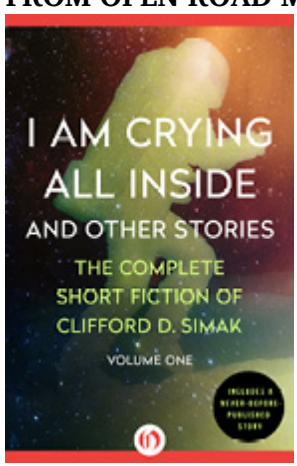

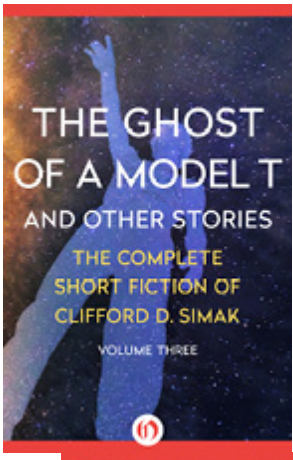
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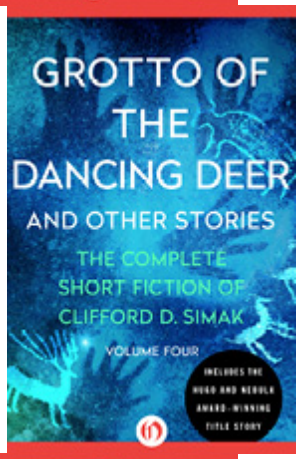
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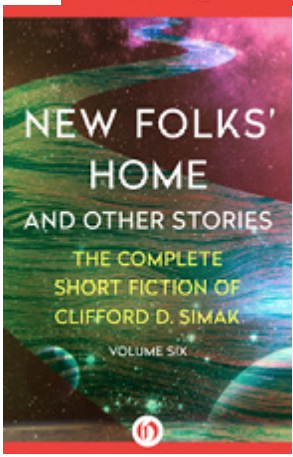
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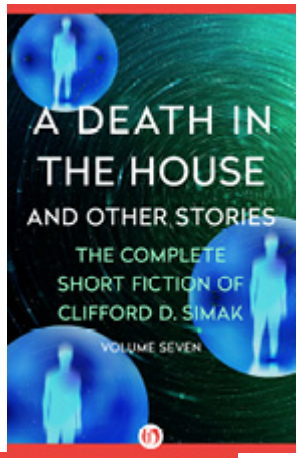

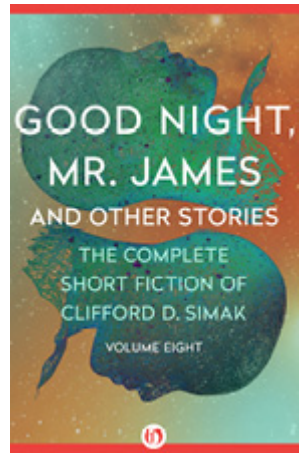

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